A Christmas to Remember

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A Christmas to Remember

by EarthsickWithoutYou

Summary

Will Graham is looking forward to a peaceful and relaxing vacation with his girlfriend Molly at a luxurious ski resort. Little does he expect to run into his ex-husband, Hannibal Lecter, who is staying at the same resort with his own companion, Alana Bloom. Will thought he left his love for Hannibal -- secretly the brutal Chesapeake Ripper -- deep in his abandoned past as an FBI profiler, but as Christmas magic fills the air and Hannibal begins working his charm to the hilt to try and win his ex's heart again...perhaps Will is not quite so over Hannibal, after all.

Nothing broken but my heart

The snow crunched under the wheels of Will's SUV when he parked it in front of the Maple Oaks Ski Lodge. That sound used to make him happy, bringing up wistful dreams of Christmas.

Now it just made him sad. Odd, how Christmas of all times had the most persistent habit of doing that. Oh, why had he agreed to this? What had he been thinking?

"What are you thinking?" Molly smiled, reaching over from the passenger seat to pat his cheek.

"I'm thinking…"

Will couldn't say, *I'm worried this trip is going to be a total bust because I inevitably ruin everything.* He wanted this to work, wanted his relationship with this kind, lovely woman to last. Molly deserved someone who tried hard to make her happy, not a man foolish enough to squander a chance with her simply because he feared himself and his past.

"I'm thinking, I can't wait to hit the slopes with you," Will smiled playfully, taking Molly's hand and pressing a kiss to the back of it. She grinned as her eyes sparkled and he felt warm inside to have brought that joy to her, almost as if it matched his own feelings. Perfect empathy was a blessing and a curse in equal measure. He was all twisted up inside, but he added merrily, "This trip is going to be *amazing.*"

"Well, of course it is, sweetie," Molly enthused. Her expression turned softly reproving then as she continued, "Just don't spend so much time focusing on whether I'm enjoying myself that you forget to relax and have fun yourself."

"Oh, I won't. I'm ready to unwind, Molly, I promise." His jaw ached from the smile he forced; his teeth felt somehow too primal, his mind too dark for the light-hearted affection she offered. He did not quite know what to do with it.

"I hope so." Slight concern brewed behind her pretty blue eyes.

Dammit, she was too smart; he could not fully convince her that he was as blissful for their winter getaway as she was, as he *should* be. As he would be were he not mortally wounded in the heart, thanks to -- well, now was definitely the last time Will should let himself think about the man responsible for his incurable broken spirit.

Was it really his fault? Or more your own?

Shit, why was he still musing on this, as if excavating the break-up from years before was somehow magically going to force things to make sense? It was never, ever going to make sense, and probably neither was he.

So if he could only make Molly believe he was happy, maybe he would believe it too, and they *could* have the absolutely perfect dream Christmas together one imagined when booking a romantic week-long stay at the sort of enormous, yet cozy ski lodge they now regarded with delight (Molly's, sincere, Will's, secretly, exhaustedly cynical). He wanted to believe in miracles again, without quite knowing why such a whimsical notion still held meaning for him.

Maybe it was all the idiotic, saccharine, wishy-washy sentimentality floating in the air at this time of the year, Will theorized almost bleakly as he and Molly got out of the car and retrieved their travel bags from the trunk. He tugged the ends of his black knit hat a little more fully over the tops of his ears, *God* it was cold up here, further north in Maine than he'd traveled before. His breath puffed in front of him in the air as Molly let out a brisk, cheerful "Brrr."

"Here," he laughed, taking her bag like the gentleman he so desperately wanted to be, and walking side by side with his girlfriend to the entrance of the lodge, bedecked with criss-crossed candy canes over the door.

The place was gorgeous inside, class personified. Woodsy and immense, it smelled of hot cocoa and peppermint, and the flames from the crackling fire in the cozy fireplace in the lounge right next to the lobby. There were large, comfy-looking couches positioned in front of the fire, and near the many big windows looking out onto idyllic, snowy views, the glass glistening with delicate ice crystals that could have been painted by Jack Frost himself.

All in all, the air buzzed with magical possibility and brimming excitement. Guests chatted as they cradled mugs of hot chocolate and cider, bundled in the ever-mandatory ugly sweaters of the season. At the check in desk, the staff were incredibly friendly, and Will felt almost as if he'd stepped into the sort of charming, old-fashioned reality you saw in silly movies like *White Christmas* or *Miracle on 34th Street.*

It was silly, but this year, this Christmas...was Will ready to believe?

"This is way beyond what I expected," Molly marveled as they trailed the bellhop to the elevator. "I feel like I'm breathing in the Christmas spirit just by being here."

"That's exactly the ambiance we strive to cultivate here at Maple Oaks, Miss," said the bellhop, an older man who, with his portly figure, pure white beard and bright red sweater, certainly could have passed for the local Kris Kringle.

"Well, mission achieved!" Molly congratulated as they stepped into the elevator, "And by the way, bonus points for calling me 'Miss' instead of 'Ma'am."

When the bellhop winked, then gave a merry laugh, Will almost expected him to say, "ho, ho, ho!" He checked his name badge quickly, discerning that the man was called -- not Kris or Santa or Nick -- but simply "Edmund."

Will was ready to get into the spirit, he decided, coasting along on Molly's exuberance and the zest of holiday adventure in the air. He would get closer to Molly, learn how to love her properly, make it right at last, instead of only a facade of rightness. They'd go skiing,

enjoying the fresh air and exercise, the thrill of zooming down fluffy slopes as if this really was a movie. At night, they would cuddle by the fire simply *relaxing,* without a care in the world.

Yes, it would be --

“Hold the elevator, please!” called out a familiar, bright and friendly voice.

Will froze as his heart seemed to seize up. It all happened much too fast: He recognized the woman’s voice, then saw her rushing towards them, squeezing into the elevator as Santa -- Edmund, that is -- hurried to press the “hold” button.

She was Alana Bloom, looking as gorgeous as ever with her silky brunette locks tumbling wildly around her shoulders at the moment, her cheeks flushed with the slight exertion of moving quickly before the elevator departed. A lock of dark hair got stuck in her lipstick and she was just a little out of breath, which is why she didn’t notice Will before her companion did. As it happened, Will didn’t mind seeing Alana at all; she was a former professional associate from his days back in Quantico teaching at the FBI Academy and consulting on serial killer cases. A talented profiler herself, Alana had always been perfectly nice to Will, liking him, for one thing, which relatively few people seemed to do. He was a bit too gloomy and introspective by nature for most people’s taste, not to mention that with his overactive empathy and ability to place himself in the mindset of violent criminals, Will could be considered *creepy.* But Alana was always one to assume the best of people.

It was because of who she was probably still dating that the sound of Alana’s voice sent a chill down Will’s spine that might have been terror or elation, or both, he couldn’t tell, he was much too busy freaking out.

Of all places--

“Will,” said Alana’s boyfriend, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, as he stepped into the elevator after her.

For one split second, there was no one else in the elevator, just Will, with his big blue eyes looking lost and found at the same time, falling immediately into Hannibal’s deep cinnamon gaze, hypnotized by the sound of his name in that warm, husky voice, the lush accent that used to whisper filthy and tender and wonderful things to him all night long. It was him, the man who could tear Will apart and put him back together again with nothing more than a look, a word, the immediate, fervent longing for a kiss and so much more. The man he should despise, whom he told himself he *must* continue hating under pain of losing himself forever to the temptations of a darkness they could share, which no one else could understand.

Hannibal Lecter was Will’s ex-husband, and unbeknownst to anyone but the two of them, he was not only an elegant, refined and respected Baltimore psychiatrist. He was also a ruthless, cannibalistic serial killer known as the Chesapeake Ripper.

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Hannibal’s heart stopped short in his chest when he saw Will, and he almost could have burst into tears of excruciating joy to set eyes on that beautiful face again, to see his beloved. Of

course, moments later he berated himself for the fleeting lapse into nonsensical sentimentality. He'd been vulnerable with Will before, and look where it had gotten him. Surely he was above falling prey to such childish emotion now.

"Hannibal," Will greeted crisply in return as his gaze darkened. He adjusted his glasses and squared his shoulders, and Hannibal's clever eyes flicked down to see how his ex-husband's fingers flexed and unflexed by his sides; he was nervous. Part of Hannibal was inadvertently rather intoxicated all at once to see he could still bring Will to an immediate state of agitation, even if the feeling behind it was no longer love, but burning resentment.

At least Will still burned for him in some small way, although Hannibal could not quite imagine why on earth he himself should care.

"Will!" Alana realized, breaking the terrible tension by giving Will a quick hug. "I can't believe we ran into you here, what were the chances?"

"Indeed," said Hannibal coldly. Will glared at him, then down at the floor; Hannibal bristled with heady, bitter feelings he would very much prefer to decline putting a name to.

Alana looked from Will to Hannibal, quickly gleaning that the former spouses had not parted as amicably as Hannibal had led her to believe. With another attempt to make this encounter less awkward, she put her hand out towards the attractive woman by Will's side and greeted pleasantly, "Hi, I'm Alana Bloom, I used to work with Will at the FBI -- well, we both consulted."

"Alana, so nice to meet you, I'm Molly Foster," Will's paramour smiled, clearly baffled by the smoldering aggression simmering in the air between Will and Hannibal.

She was also probably wondering why Will had not introduced his acquaintances, and as far as Hannibal was concerned, it really was rather insulting that Will did not even consider him worthy of meeting his new lover. He looked the woman up and down, doing his best to remain subtle in his instant hatred of her. Well, he supposed she was comely enough, with her apple-cheeked, innocent face and lustrous dark blonde hair, and he shouldn't expect Will to remain single forever. After all, he had moved on himself -- very well, he had *attempted* to move on by dating the beautiful and thoroughly charming Alana Bloom, whilst remaining painfully in love with his ex-husband, a man who had rejected him after Hannibal bared his soul.

It really would not do for Hannibal to rip this "Molly" woman's neck open with his fingernails at this juncture, but the way she slipped her hand into Will's made his stomach churn, and he regretted the rather obvious impossibility of the impulsive, murderous urge.

"And this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter," Alana continued, her brow ever so slightly furrowed at the way Will remained sullenly silent while Hannibal smiled at Molly in a way that looked almost venomous. "He's a renowned psychiatrist and not-so-secretly an amazing chef."

"Then you must be planning on entering our holiday baking contest," chimed in the bearded bellhop, causing Hannibal to look at him sharply before realizing that the imposing stranger was actually quite correct.

“Oh, yes,” Hannibal answered, infusing his sophisticated tone with the usual smoothness that normally worked quite well in cloaking the ravenous killer beneath his handsome and appealing person suit. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“So, you two are here for a couples’ vacation?” Will very nearly snapped by way of small-talk.

“What an incisive observation, Will.” Speaking tartly, Hannibal made the most of his slight height advantage over Will to almost loom over his former spouse, and Will’s brittle glare in return excited him a little too much.

The elevator had begun its ascent, but in Hannibal’s opinion seemed to be moving almost in slow motion, much to his annoyance. He wanted to extricate himself from this horrific social nightmare as soon as possible, then avoid Will for the remainder of his stay here with Alana. There was no reason why he should have to miss a moment of the pleasant respite he had planned to enjoy at the lodge, and he certainly wasn’t going to run away simply because his ex-husband happened to have selected the same holiday destination. He would leave the running away business strictly to Will, who had shown such a remarkable talent for it, after all.

“Just trying to be sociable,” Will grumbled, surly.

“Never your strong suit,” Hannibal retorted.

“No, I leave the strong *suits* to you,” Will snapped, looking over Hannibal’s typically pristine dark blue plaid suit with an acid-eyed loathing.

“Oh, Will, always full of accusations for those around you, never one to spare for yourself.”

Hannibal smiled, wishing there was anything more he wanted in life than for everyone else to leave so he could slam Will against the elevator wall and fuck the daylights out of him, kissing those petulant lips with all his might. His Will, *his* Will, was even more stunning than in his damnably persistent memories. Now it was clear to Hannibal he never had let go of Will, despite telling himself for several years that he had succeeded in the goal.

He had missed Will *so* much that to see him this suddenly was an agony too sweet to be endured. It was impossible to tell what was holding him together right now; he seemed to be composed of nothing but love for this man who hated him -- what was he doing here, right back where he started? What had happened to so quickly decimate his mighty pride? It infuriated him that Will still had this power.

“You know what, Hannibal, why don’t you go to--” Will began, his eyes blazing.

“Your room,” the bellhop put in. “You’re on the fourth floor, aren’t you, Dr. Lecter, Dr. Bloom?”

Will and Hannibal looked at each other, and it was as if their anger and desire, which felt palpably mutual, crystallized to the point they might both shatter into pieces on the floor.

Hannibal was sure he must be sinking into wishful thinking by even remotely entertaining the notion Will still cared for him, or held him in any regard other than loathing.

Alana and Molly looked at the men they had arrived on vacation with, then at each other. Molly was wide-eyed with utter bewilderment, while of course Alana knew a bit more of the situation, and looked suspicious as well as concerned, an interesting combination (not one that boded well for Hannibal's relationship with her).

"What the…" Molly blinked quickly, trying to compute the absolute mess of a reunion they had just witnessed.

Hannibal shot her a smug look. "Good evening, then," he said with arrogant dominance of the situation. "I hope you both enjoy your stay."

Alana sighed in slight annoyance at his antics and said to Molly, "It was so lovely to meet you."

"Great to meet you, too!" Molly replied, looking certain that it had been, even if everything else about the situation was suddenly very confusing.

Will still stood there holding her hand but otherwise looking disconnected from her entirely, much to Hannibal's satisfaction.

Hannibal exited the elevator when it opened and strolled off down the hall with Alana, rolling their suitcases on wheels behind them. He did not cast a single look back over his shoulder at Will.

That would show him.

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"Will, what in the world was that all about?" Molly asked as they got off the elevator on the fifth floor and quickly found their own room.

Will slid the keycard into the door, blushing up to the tips of his ears and the roots of his hair. Dammit, why was he always such a tempestuous fool the moment he got around Hannibal fucking Lecter? It was as if there was some narcotic essence rolling off the man's presence that sparked something primitive in Will, a *need* to argue, to prove himself right, underneath which lurked a far deeper, equally animalistic desire.

Maybe it was the cheekbones, the plush lips, his handsome goddamn obnoxious face, his beautiful body always decked out in the most annoyingly perfect attire. His smokey, all-consuming gaze, his luscious, deep voice in that sexy accent that still drove Will--

"Oh, it was nothing," Will said as lightly as possible, considering the fact that his heart was still racing and he couldn't quite keep his hands from trembling.

"Wow, would you look at this room," he said in an attempt to quickly transition from further discussions of Hannibal. And it was a *wonderful* room.

The walls were simple, plain wood, and the combination of that rustic vibe with several more elegant design pieces created a lovely effect, welcoming and perfect for the holidays. A pretty chandelier hung over a king-sized bed covered in a cranberry duvet with a subtly sparkling pattern of snowflakes. The mattress felt like a dream, as Will discovered when he sat down and let out a contented sigh that did not at all match his feelings.

“It’s fantastic,” Molly mused, wandering to the window which overlooked the shining white slopes and the ski lifts, the sun slowly setting behind them in lazy winter gold. She held her own arm, then scratched it under her festive Christmas sweater with a picture of a reindeer whose antlers were decorated with twinkle lights.

“Umm...I feel like you’re being a bit evasive about this Hannibal guy,” she finally admitted. That was a lot for her: Molly hated confrontations. “Why don’t you two get along? Is there something I should know?”

He felt bad to be making her worry over his past mistakes, and worse that he had to now explain himself (or make some attempt, anyway).

“Okay. See, we used to be married.” Will considered if there was a way to make that sentence less awkward. “At one point,” he finished, only to realize there was no saving this conversation from the realm of the supremely weird.

“You what?” Molly asked, astonished as she turned around to gape at him.

“For a little while,” Will said, running his fingers over the silky, yet soft fabric of the duvet.

“Will, we’ve been together for five months and you’ve never even told me you were *married*?”

“It didn’t last very long.” Will put his hands together in his lap now, over his blue jeans.

He looked down at the plain, slightly wrinkled black shirt he wore, noticing that one of the buttons was close to falling off. He felt like that himself, a fraying thread. If he kept thinking about Hannibal, he was going to fall apart, and he didn’t want to go back down that road, feel those emotions again after fighting so hard to lock the man out of his heart.

“How long?” Molly asked, quiet and sensitive. She sat beside him, their thighs lightly touching, and placed a tentative hand on Will’s knee.

“Six months,” Will recalled, poisonous renewed grief gushing through his veins.

Oh, God. They used to be so happy. They used to be more than this, a retired profiler stewing in stale resentment and the snobby, stand-offish therapist who used to love him. They used to be Will and Hannibal, and they were everything to each other; they set each other’s worlds on fire, they were larger than life. He’d been so alive back then.

“I’m sorry.” Molly caressed his hand, and Will bit his lip against the urge to push her away.

He didn’t want her touch at this moment, not with gnawing thoughts of Hannibal pulling him apart inside, rough and fearful with reignited, terrible old feelings he should excise at any

cost, even if it killed him -- that would be safer.

“It’s a hard thing to love someone enough to marry them, and then have it not work out, so quickly.” She sighed, nuzzling into his shoulder, and Will breathed in her scent of jasmine, completely aghast at himself that he was still half-drunk off the scent of Hannibal’s sultry, spicy cologne and the heat of his body lingering just a little too close in the elevator. They didn’t have to touch for him to feel Hannibal on him, pressing hard and too deep, smothering him, eating him alive. The pleasure, the fury and the fear battled harshly in his heart.

“Yes,” Will acknowledged, swallowing past a lump in his throat. “I’m sorry I never mentioned it to you before, Molly. I knew you’d understand, it isn’t that. I...have a hard time talking about it.”

“That’s only natural,” Molly answered, making excuses for him already. She was so good at that, and Will could never tell if it would be the glue to bind them together, or their undoing. “He hurt you,” she guessed softly.

Will wanted to cry, but if he let himself (which he never had, not even on the day he found out Hannibal was the Ripper, not even in the car after divorce court), it would never end. He’d cry forever. He’d scare Molly if he let out even an iota of his feelings about Hannibal; he would scare himself. All he could do was nod weakly, longing for another convenient subject change.

“Yes. He really did,” said Will.

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Hannibal and Alana had passed an awkward night, neither of them caring to directly broach the topic of his bizarrely intense behavior towards Will. They went to sleep on the very opposite ends of the big, luxurious bed in their room, and curled up on his side Hannibal thought to himself that the room smelled of pine needles. The scent reminded him annoyingly of that cheap, repugnant aftershave Will always wore, the one that still, unfortunately, hit him like a powerful aphrodisiac, with a strong undercurrent of emotional longing. It wasn't repugnant at all, he realized as yearning washed over him, memories of loving Will all night until the break of dawn, wearing his beautiful body out with all the adoration his overflowing heart could conjure. The two of them twisted in sweaty sheets, possessing each other as no one else ever could, Will's voice, softly rough in his ear, begging for more...Hannibal's dreams were full of such visions for hours. Will smelled, looked and felt exactly like home, and without him, Hannibal had been rendered a listless wanderer, impossible to satisfy.

The next morning, he rose early and took a shower while Alana kept sleeping. As he dressed, opting for a soft-looking outfit of an oatmeal-colored, cable-knit sweater over a white oxford with pale tan trousers, Hannibal considered his situation more frankly than he had previously allowed.

Swiping a hand over his wet hair and leaning into the mirror, he caught himself not so much preening as usual, but checking for any new creases or imperfections in his skin. Of course, there were none, except for those that added dignified character and sensual maturity to his

otherwise flawless visage. Satisfied and somewhat relieved that he looked more than presentable, Hannibal admitted several truths to himself.

1. That his relationship with Alana had been slowly laboring towards an uninteresting ending for quite some time now. In fact, that they were mutually allowing the affair to fade away while still blandly enjoying the convenience of each others' company and having a date for such times as the holidays was almost as boring as the relationship itself. It was going to be over soon, they both knew it.
2. He was still devastatingly in love with Will Graham. In spite of every way the former profiler had broken his heart, he had also ruined Hannibal for anyone else by rendering him an eternally devoted fool where Will was concerned. There was no escaping this fact.
3. Hannibal was unlikely ever to have a chance like this again: here they were, miraculously turned up at the same vacation destination, almost as if...almost as if Christmas magic truly did exist. While he found *that* idea to be complete poppycock, there was no denying that this was a special circumstance, of which he should take full advantage. Perhaps there was a way to win Will back.

Should he...make Will jealous? Contrive to find times for the two of them to be alone together, make himself as irresistibly sexy as he possibly could, draw Will to him so that his ex-husband could no longer deny the way they were absolutely made for one another?

He checked his phone's calendar to confirm what he already knew, as if seeing the physical fact of the date would underline and cement the plan in his mind, the plan to get Will back in his arms, no matter what it took, who else got hurt or eaten, and however much he would have to sacrifice his pride in the endeavor (this was the only bit that disturbed him, but he knew he would have to let it go, at least a little, in order to succeed).

Hannibal walked to the window before the balcony of their suite and opened the door, stepping out to admire the lovely view, early morning skiers gliding down the high hills, sending cascades of fluffy, sparkling, perfect Christmas snow in their wake. The sun, while not nearly hot enough to begin melting the snow-covered grounds, was pleasantly warm on his lifted face. He closed his eyes and offered something like a prayer or a renewed wedding vow to the universe, the usually uncaring God above, his own understanding and resolve.

It is December 20, and by Christmas day, Will Graham will be mine again, this time forevermore. Hannibal had less than a week to work his miracle, and had therefore not a moment to lose in beginning his scheme.

Rehab

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 21

This is going to be perfectly fine, Will reasoned firmly with himself as he and Molly took the elevator down to breakfast in the resort's function room, an amenity included with the vacation package they had purchased.

"Jeez, I'm starving," Molly groaned, patting her belly. "I hope the breakfast is as yummy as last night's dinner, because that was sooo good."

"It sure was," Will enthused with plastic sincerity, Jesus fuck, why was it so hard to get into the character of the life he had so meticulously designed for himself to replace the one he once shared with Hannibal?

Last night, he and Molly had apple-stuffed pork loin and cranberry old fashioneds at the resort's fancy restaurant, and Will had pretended he was not at all surprised or disappointed that Hannibal and Alana didn't come down to dinner in the same place. He worried that maybe they ordered room service, all the better to make love in celebration of their arrival for a romantic getaway, while Hannibal did not think about Will at all, whatsoever. Keeping his own mind off of his ex and on his plan for a happy Christmas with Molly was starting to feel like Will's new job.

He'd heard that Hannibal and Alana were a couple a while back, during one of the semiannual phone calls which Jack Crawford made to try and lure him back to the field. At the time, he worried slightly for Alana but supposed Hannibal must have real regard for her, as the man was notoriously picky about his lovers and would not take one lightly. He tricked himself into hoping they'd be happy together and that Hannibal would maybe ease back on the killing, settle into domesticity with someone better suited to that lifestyle, someone easy-going, gentle and sweet such as Will could never be.

What a disaster crock of lies he'd been feeding himself. The idea of a watered-down Hannibal who never killed again only filled Will with a feeling of disappointment teetering on downright despair, while the thought that Alana might appeal more to Hannibal's impeccable aesthetic, might more easily bend to his ever-dominant ways, sent a shock of jealousy through him that made Will want to puke.

"I'm starving again, too," he lied, holding Molly's hand like a life preserver as they exited the elevator and strolled towards the function room, which was large and crowded with cheery guests eating at round tables covered in berry-red linens. The walls dripped with fairy lights, and Christmas music played over speakers at the ideal volume to be merry, but not overtake the possibility of easy conversation.

He'd be fine, as long as he didn't have to hear "All I Want for Christmas is You," a song that never failed to inspire a feral rage in his soul. For...reasons.

"Eggnog pancakes, sign me up!" Molly laughed, grabbing a plate at the buffet line.

They loaded their plates with fluffy scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, eggnog and hot cocoa pancakes, and fresh fruit, then headed to their assigned table to dig in. Will managed to force some of the absolutely delicious meal down in tiny, difficult bites, mostly looking around to see if Hannibal had arrived, while distractedly carrying on a conversation with Molly.

"*While You Were Sleeping* is like an unofficial Christmas movie, you know, like *Home Alone,*" Molly pointed out, looking pretty in a white long-sleeved thermal shirt under a silver ski vest and black leggings, her hair in two ponytails that draped beguilingly over her shoulders.

Will wanted to want her. He wanted to want her charming conversation and everything else about this moment, and he was failing it like a test for a course he never should have taken because he was ridiculously underqualified.

"Yeah, absolutely, I agree," he chimed in. "We should watch them this year."

He felt slightly exhausted still, as he hadn't slept much the night before, unwilling to give up on their vacation after all the planning and looking forward to it; he couldn't just flee simply because his ex was staying here, too. Maybe he wouldn't even see Hannibal again -- after all, the man had pristine taste, and this was a breakfast buffet. He should stop watching the door for Hannibal and work *harder* to stay faithful in heart and mind to Molly.

"I'm gonna get more coffee, can I bring you back anything else?" he asked, as warmly as he could, smiling as Molly tapped a finger to her chin in contemplation of the appealing offer.

"Just one of those blueberry waffles," she requested, "With maple syrup."

"You got it," Will winked, setting off for the buffet line again.

He was filling his cup with as much black coffee as would fit without spilling over, when he suddenly smelled fine, manly cologne and sensed the ambiance of evil in the air. "Dr. Lecter," he said flatly without looking up at first.

"Good morning, Will," Hannibal greeted, not with the same muted aggression, but with a sensuous, mysterious tone that automatically made Will look up at him in surprise.

"Where's Alana?" He blurted, sipping his coffee, forgetting to blow on it first, so that he burned his tongue and cursed inwardly, *fuck!* while pretending he was totally fine.

"You should really blow on that first," Hannibal suggested with a soft, amused smile that made Will want to kick him in the stomach or pour the hot drink over his head, or just kiss him until they were both dizzy.

Will rolled his eyes as Hannibal continued, "Alana is endeavoring to put together a suitable outfit for our skiing jaunt today and had a bit of indecision on the matter. I said I'd make a

plate for her as she'll be here shortly."

"*Make a plate*?" Will repeated incredulously. "Do you know where you are, Hannibal? This is a breakfast *buffet.* The waffles are shaped like snowflakes, and there are *sprinkles* you can put on them."

"And so?" Hannibal lifted his light brows, a large plate poised in his hands, innocence painted across his features in that one certain way that told Will his ex was *definitely* up to something, conjuring mischief.

"And so, you're way too much of a stuck-up, priggish snob to tolerate eating at a Christmas-themed buffet among all these people wearing tacky sweaters and bopping their heads to 'Jingle Bells.'"

Hannibal leaned slightly closer with an air of conspiratorial flirtation and murmured, "Jingle all the way, Will."

"What are you up to?" Will said heatedly, "What the hell are you wearing, why do you look so...down to earth and innocuous?"

He tried to ignore the way the cream shade of Hannibal's sweater looked gorgeous against his golden skin and the silver-blonde of his hair, bringing out his big brown eyes and his self-satisfied smirk. Why did he have to be so fuckable, all the damn time? It was too distracting.

"Why, thank you for noticing, Will," Hannibal replied, as if absolutely delighted by every one of Will's nervously grumpy remarks. "I cannot help but observe that you look anything but innocuous, although I apologize, as the fact must contradict your ongoing quest for normalcy."

Will glanced down at his own attire: his nicest dark-wash jeans, the ones that fit him in that flattering way, showing off his slender body and supple ass; a white t-shirt under a red and white flannel shirt that was newer and smoother than any other he owned; and over *that* a light pine green sweater. He was no fashion plate, but he'd done his very best to layer his "ski vacation" outfit in an appealing way. He'd even lingered way too long in the bathroom fluffing and tugging at his ever-untamable curls, fooling himself however briefly that he wasn't dressing up and making himself look his best because he might see Hannibal.

Hannibal, who licked his lips with a wicked gleam in his eyes and added, "You look extraordinarily sexy this morning, if you do not mind my saying so, Will."

"Okay, what's this all about, anyway?" Will demanded, stabbing several waffles and bestowing them on his plate with violence.

"Careful there, son," said the bearded older gentleman who had been their elevator attendant the night before and was currently refilling the fresh fruit assortment.

"I thought you were the bellhop," Will accused, casting the man, Edmund, as he recalled, a stormy glance.

“Oh, I do a lot of little things around here to earn my keep,” Edmund chuckled.

“*Anyway,*” Will continued as the bellhop-waiter disappeared back to the kitchen and Hannibal calmly placed several pancakes and sausages on his own plate, hovering too close beside him. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, I assure you, my dear, except that I have decided to drop all pretenses whatsoever where you are concerned. What were the chances I should ever have this opportunity to see you again, much less tell you that you are still the most beautiful sight I have ever beheld?”

“*That’s* -- just -- stop it,” Will insisted, pouring an absurd amount of syrup on the waffles, then setting the plate down and turning to face Hannibal full-on, glowering. “You have a girlfriend, Hannibal, and we’re divorced.”

“Hmm. Too true, but I’m not happy in my relationship. Are you happy in your relationship, Will?”

“Molly and I *want* to be happy,” Will announced, infusing the words with a vehemence that held no real conviction. “And we will be. You’re not ruining this Christmas with more of your despicable schemes, okay? So don’t even bother.”

“Do you find me disingenuous? Yet I am being completely open with you, while you continue to hide from me in that same old way. Perhaps I won’t give up so easily this time, what about that?”

You never gave up, I did. Will wanted to cry, so he forced a painful, harsh laugh instead. *I was never brave, like you.*

“Listen, what do you want? Out with it, Hannibal, let’s resolve this here and now so I can go back to my vacation in peace.”

“My darling Will, always working so hard to prove to yourself you crave sweet and easy peace. I’m still in love with you. Seeing you again is absolutely exhilarating to me, and the annoyance I felt at your presence has soon melted away into a desperate desire to possess you once again.”

“Shh,” Will hissed. “For God’s sake, what are you going on about? We broke up for a *reason,* Hannibal, a very serious one. You’re not going to change, and I’m not going to accept what you do. So just let it go already.”

“I don’t want to change.” Hannibal frowned. “And I don’t want you to change, nor force yourself to fit a cookie cutter mold of stability and goodness that never made you happy, and never will. *I* want to make you happy, as yourself, not this false--”

“It’s not false, this is who I am,” Will whispered intensely, making Hannibal cringe a bit. “I’m sorry, alright, but it’s never going to happen. You don’t know me like you think you do, you’re just projecting your own personality and wishes onto me.”

“Am I?” Hannibal inquired, hurt and pride mingled in his tone. Expertly, he arranged his two plates of food, one for himself and one for Alana, on his arm and prepared to set off for their table. “I see. Thank you for ending the illusion so bluntly. Since there is no chance you will ever want me again, I suppose I should recommit myself to my relationship with Alana.”

“Hannibal,” Will sighed, feeling for some godforsaken reason a bit guilty for rejecting him like that.

“It’s quite alright, Will. Have a delightful time with Molly.” With that, Hannibal walked off to his table and set the food down, all while Will was still standing there muttering, *“But -- I never said -- I just meant --”*

He sighed and went empty-handed back to his table with Molly, sitting down with an aggravated sigh, willing his heart to stop racing.

“Hey, where’s your coffee?” Molly asked, perplexed. With a pout, she added, “And where's my waffle?”

Alana turned up a few minutes later, flawless in a black henley with embroidered pictures of skis and snowflakes on the back, a wool miniskirt with a nylon covering in red, grey and black vertical stripes, thick grey tights and a pair of designer faux fur black snow boots. Her long, glossy dark tresses were covered on top by a grey knit hat with a festive pom pom, and overall she was dressed perfectly...for a modeling job in a high end winter clothing catalogue, certainly *not* for skiing.

Molly’s jaw dropped as she regarded Alana in admiration. “Wow.”

“Be right back,” Will muttered, realizing he still needed to drag his sorry ass back to the buffet line to retrieve his coffee and get Molly a plate of waffles that hadn’t been stabbed to death and drowned in syrup.

“What did I miss?” Alana asked him with her typical chipper attitude as he approached.

“I honestly have no idea,” he sighed. “Hannibal’s waiting for you over there, he already got your food.”

“Okay,” Alana shrugged, looking with curious dark blue eyes over at Molly, who smiled and waved, then to Hannibal’s subtly crestfallen demeanor, and back at Will’s quietly crumpled fake smile, his specialty and not something that had ever particularly fooled her he was doing well.

“This is kind of weird, right?” she added, crinkling her nose.

Will finally gave into an honest laugh. “I mean, you can say that again.”

“This is kind of weird,” she whispered. In her normal tone, she added, “And I know given the fact that I’m with Hannibal now, it might seem odd of me to say this, but you look like you could use someone to talk to. If that’s the case, I’m still around, you know.”

“Thanks, Alana. Same here.” Will patted her shoulder, then hurriedly got what he needed and returned to Molly, desperately hoping the rest of the day would be less profoundly strange.

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Annual Christmas Bake-off! December 22 at 1pm in the function room! Grand prize: Upgrade to the Honeymoon Suite! First, Second and Third Prizes: Romantic dinner for two at Maude’s, champagne included!

Will scowled at the poster on the lobby wall as if it had personally attacked him. So many exclamation points! Was it this inane opportunity to lord his effortlessly superior cooking skills over an innocent population of Christmas skiers that had drawn Hannibal to this specific resort? Ordinarily, Will might have assumed Hannibal quite capable of coming here because he knew Will would be present, but he had been unmistakably surprised when they came face to face in that elevator yesterday.

Hannibal was many things, but if their relationship had taught Will anything despite all the miserable results of their chemical reaction, their emotional earthquakes, they were awful at lying to each other. He knew Hannibal’s shock had been genuine. His own had yet to wear off, like an unwanted but persistent thrill of suspense.

At any rate, he had to admit the other contestants in the baking contest would never know what hit them until it was too late. Hannibal would defeat them with laughable ease. Consequently, Will had no intention of hanging around to watch Hannibal’s pretentious, easy victory. No matter how cute he was when he cooked, especially with the intention of pleasing a crowd; no matter how fucking adorable he always looked with that damn smug smile and the little undercurrent of excitement in genuinely making others happy with his cuisine.

Lest he forget what *other* ingredients were included in Hannibal’s more savory fare, Will yanked his thoughts away from the sentimental memories, which could easily make him forgive the unforgivable. Hannibal still had the ability to charm him and love him so perfectly, it was a palpable -- not to mention exciting -- possibility, one Will had to keep fighting.

“Is that the contest Hannibal is going to compete in?” Molly asked casually, appearing at his side with their heavy winter coats.

Will took off his glasses, placed them in their slender case and slipped them into the inner pocket of his coat.

“Thanks, Molly. Yeah, I guess he’s competing tomorrow. But who cares?” He smiled, devoting himself once more to the high road that led out of hell to happiness with his girlfriend.

“I’m here for you,” he added, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “And we’re going to have fun skiing all day, then have another amazing meal, and forget about everyone else.”

“Are we?” Molly laughed, taking his gloved hand in her own. “That’s great, Will, but you don’t have to convince me.”

Her unspoken next sentence shimmered like a prophecy of doom between them: *you need to convince yourself, believe you're really over Hannibal.*

But it was Christmas, and things had always been nice between them (a little too nice, but that's what they both seemed to need when they first met. If they'd evolved past that by now, if they were mutually starting to realize it, well, any sane couple would enjoy the rest of their beautiful vacation rather than shattering the whole season and the fun with an ill-timed break-up). It was all going to be just fine...for now.

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And it was just fine -- it was better than that. They skied their hearts out, getting amazing exercise and enjoying the cold ache in their faces as they grinned at each other, racing downhill, almost as if they were flying. But Will had flown before, had left the rational world on a euphoric ascent, he'd been truly in love, and this, this was friendship. He did know the difference, as it turned out. Disappointing, that he wasn't in love with Molly, but after all, he and Hannibal started out as friends (had they, though?) -- Will tried to think, *my friendship with Molly could still blossom into love, too. We owe it to ourselves to keep trying.* Did he think she was trying too, or genuinely enjoying herself during their time together? There seemed to be the same, if more subtle, discontent simmering behind her own smiles, and it was more confusing because they liked doing all the same activities, they made each other laugh, they planned their restaurant orders so they could each get a taste of a meal they had an eye on. Their relationship had all the stereotypical indications of ideal compatibility, but that special spark was conspicuously missing.

"I'm exhausted," Molly groaned when they got back to their room. "I'm going to grab a shower and it will be a miracle if I'm not asleep before I even make it to bed."

Will laughed and gave her a hug. Their once cold faces were now wine-warmed, and he imagined her belly was pleasantly full after the dinner at Maude's which he had more pathetically picked at once again. There had only ever been one reason why Will's appetite suddenly went on the fritz. Investigating horrific killings had never done it; but the riveting sensation of being in the same place as Hannibal, even when they hadn't seen each other in hours, well, it accomplished the annoying task just fine.

"Sounds like a plan," he added, kissing her hand. She kissed his cheek and disappeared to the bathroom, leaving him to ponder how good they had gotten at finding excuses to avoid going to bed together for more intimate purposes, and how infrequently their lips actually touched.

When had that all started to fade away? He couldn't really recall. He must have been trying to hide it from himself for quite some time now.

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The lobby was more dimly lit, but still open when Will wandered in around 1am, wearing his bathrobe, pajamas and slippers, running a discontented hand through his hair, mussed not from sleep, but tossing and turning. Thoughts of wanting to be with Molly but *needing* to be with Hannibal had made sleep impossible, and being awake just made him realize he was

finally ravenous. His stomach announced his arrival to the attendant at the front desk, growling before Will could even say hello.

“Well, I think I know what brought you down here, young man,” Edmund chuckled, his kind, light blue eyes crinkling as Will regarded him with a sort of hollow, despairing refusal to acknowledge the humor in this situation. “Feeling hungry?”

The humor, and the irony. Fuck. He was hungry for so much more than food, but that was a tomorrow problem. Right now…

“I know it’s late,” he said, doing his best “friendly smile” and hoping it did not land, as it so often did, closer to the “sneer” category of expression. “But yeah, I was wondering if the kitchen’s still open at all? I didn’t want to wake Molly by calling room service.”

“Why, of course, Will,” the Kris Kringle lookalike smiled kindly. “The chef is off duty, of course, but there are sandwiches, cookies and hot cocoa in the kitchen, and I say finders, keepers.”

He winked. Will frowned, impervious to Christmas merriment of all kinds.

“I’m thirty-eight years old, I don’t need *cookies and hot cocoa*.”

“Ah. That is your entire problem in a nutshell, Will, isn’t it?” Edmund shook his head, looking more serious. In his bright red sweater, he really did look the part so exactly that some childish instinct inside Will kept repeating excitedly, *Santa! Santa!*

Will put his hands in his robe pockets, not quite as formidable an arguing adversary as usual, given his green plaid pj’s. “What do you mean? You don’t even know me.”

“Anybody can see it, Will.” Edmund adjusted his half-moon glasses at the end of his nose, seemingly absorbed with a paper he had in front of him, some kind of list -- probably a financial ledger or guest list, Will assumed, hotel work -- which he was going over with pen in hand. “You have lost the Christmas spirit, and there’s some small part of you, no matter how faint, that wants it back again.”

“Heh,” Will retorted humorlessly, “You can’t lose what you never had.”

“Exactly,” Edmund noted with an obnoxious veracity. “And you can’t entirely lose what somehow still means so much to you, but we could say that about more than one thing in your life, ay? Now in the meantime, I think there’s at least one matter on which we might agree.”

“What’s that?” Will asked, annoyed that he was curious.

“Everyone needs cookies and hot cocoa sometimes, Will.” Edmund smiled again, so gently, Will couldn’t help a miniscule chuckle.

“Thanks for the food, Edmund. You have a good night,” Will said, refusing to add anything so ridiculous as *Merry Christmas*, even if his heart seemed to be whispering it would be the perfect thing to say in the moment.

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Hannibal was putting the finishing touches on a dessert so splendid, it was certain to win the baking contest tomorrow, and while he wasn't exactly threatened by the competition, still...it soothed him to show off his superior skills, prove definitively that he wasn't a complete failure, despite the disheartening conversation with Will from that morning.

He wore a merry red apron bearing an unfortunate design of two thumbs pointing towards himself, accompanied by the slogan, *This Guy Loves Christmas*, with a white image of a Christmas tree in the middle. As ugly and ridiculous as the apron was, it did protect Hannibal's flawless white shirt from being stained as he worked on his recipe, which was clearly the priority, as no one else was actually going to see him in this--

"Oh, seriously?" Will snorted, coming into the kitchen and immediately grimacing in dark humor at Hannibal's presence. "That Santa is evil. I swear, he's trying to set us up or something. He knew you were in here, didn't he?"

"Good evening, Will." Hannibal began the encounter in renewed bitterness at Will's implacable dislike for him. "If you are referring to Edmund, then yes. He was kind enough to supply me with an apron and access to the kitchen so that I could work on my recipe for tomorrow's competition. I assure you, I certainly did not contrive for you to arrive here at the same time."

Of course, if I had been able to manage such a thing, I certainly would have.

Hannibal's face softened inevitably as Will shifted from outright indignance to rumpled, tired melancholy, embodied in a heavy sigh. His dear boy really did look so delicious when he was tired and in his pajamas and robe, glasses bringing out the bright blue of his eyes and making Hannibal long to set them on the counter, cup that gorgeous face, and kiss Will's sumptuous lips. How his heart skipped a beat at the thought, even as Will withdrew his gaze from Hannibal's. Resigned to sharing his company out of necessity, Hannibal supposed, Will went to the refrigerator and began placing items on the side counter by the stove: the large thermos of hot cocoa, the platter of sandwiches under plastic wrap.

"So it's your appetite that brought you here," Hannibal continued, breezily proceeding as if Will was not ignoring him.

Working at the center island of the kitchen, he was creating attractive plumes of meringue atop pale green miniature pies.

"So it seems," Will grumbled, pouring cocoa in a mug and sticking it dispiritedly in the microwave. He put a turkey sandwich on his plate and turned to regard Hannibal with suspicious wonderment.

"You're making key lime tarts?" Will's eyes lingered now on the golden-brown crusts filled with scrumptious, tart flavor, topped off by swirls of meringue like small clouds. Hannibal was now placing a small lime wedge in each cloud, and he knew the effect was mouth-watering.

Will held the plate with his sandwich against his stomach as if it was a shield to protect him from the hazards of voluntarily conversing with his ex-husband. “They’ll all be making apple pie, pumpkin pie, gingerbread...nobody likes to eat key lime pie this time of year.”

“Except for you,” Hannibal smiled, pleased with the way the tarts looked now that they were done. He leaned back to survey them, blushing as Will took the information in.

“But...I mean, yeah. You remember that?” Will had once professed boredom with only eating the exact same pies every holiday, which honestly had just been a byproduct tangent of his general cynicism regarding the season. Hannibal had taken it upon himself to make key lime instead, and Will discovered it was his new favorite.

When Hannibal glanced over at Will again, the younger man was blushing as well, his mouth hanging slightly open. So very kissable. Hannibal was not quite sure why, but somehow Will was equally desirable now, confused, grumpy and sleep-deprived, as he would be dressed in his finest suit with his hair slicked back. Will’s beauty still quite blew Hannibal away, and he almost forgot that this man had broken his heart into so many pieces, he did not think there was a way to find them all or ever be whole again. Like a fool, once again Hannibal let himself hope.

“I remember everything, Will.” Hannibal gave him a pointed look, soft and stern all at once. Then he whipped off his apron, hung it on the hook by the stove, and carefully covered the tarts before placing them in the refrigerator where they would be ready for tomorrow’s contest.

“Do you want a sandwich?” Will glowered, ever so slightly defeated.

“I’m fine for now, thank you, Will. But aren’t you going to have a cookie?” Hannibal nodded at the large jar behind Will on the counter.

Will set his plate down and reached into the big Santa jar to pull out a sugar cookie shaped like a Christmas stocking. “I guess if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,” he reasoned by way of an excuse for the cookies and cocoa.

“Yes, it could not possibly be that the spirit of the season, and a nostalgic longing for its traditional trappings, has led you to crave this particular snack.” Hannibal smirked and Will sighed again.

The microwave beeped, indicating that Will’s cocoa was hot and ready.

“Shut up. Are you coming or not?”

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“Anyway, I don’t know why you’re pretending to be Mr. Christmas all of a sudden,” Will accused as they sat on the rug before the fireplace in the lounge.

He nibbled at his snack, hyper-aware of Hannibal’s warm, steady presence so near him, those pretty amber eyes rendered even more splendid by quietly crackling firelight. The room was

so quiet and cozy, he felt it again, that weird *Christmassy* sensation, mixed with his intolerable attraction to Hannibal until he was slightly dizzy. Everywhere he looked there was a sprig of holly, a wreath, a draped row of twinkle lights, a jolly figurine of an elf, Santa or nutcracker. There was a huge, stunning, real Christmas tree behind them, shining with red and green lights, covered in tinsel and ornaments.

It was a funny sensation, all told, because despite the nostalgic cravings which Hannibal had correctly mentioned, Will could only remember one happy Christmas from his whole life so far. It wasn't as if he had some vast memory palace filled with adorable Christmas traditions with a loving family. It was a feeling he had only experienced once. It ought to be easier to shake.

Hannibal sipped from his own mug of cocoa, flavored deliciously with mint, and answered with that same quiet calm that characterized this fragile almost-truce of sorts, "You recall my generally Scrooge-like attitude towards the holidays."

"One of the first reasons we bonded was having difficult childhoods, right?" Will finished his sandwich and dabbed the sides of his mouth with a green cloth napkin, fiddling with it in his lap afterwards. "There's something about that, that people with normal backgrounds can never understand or share."

"We were drawn together for many reasons, Will. I felt a magnetic pull in your direction from the first moment our eyes met. But in answer to your original question, perhaps I don't know what else to do at this remarkable turning point in my life, this unexpected, marvelous, frankly terrifying possibility. I never expected to see you again, and now...somehow I find myself needing to believe in Christmas. In miracles."

"It's not that easy for me, I'm sorry. I mean, putting aside the fact that you have a girlfriend and I have a girlfriend and you should absolutely not be continuously flirting with me, it's still wrong. It always will be. We're impossible," he shrugged, wishing he could transmute the gaping wound of their broken romance into friendship. Even that was more than Hannibal deserved, after the lies and the terrible truth about what he did, but...still, Will wanted to smooth this over. Maybe that was impossible, too.

"Alana is a wonderful woman, and anyone would be very lucky to have the opportunity to be with her. I imagine you feel much the same regarding Molly."

"I imagine you'd like to kill Molly," Will retorted drily. "Don't, by the way. Or I'll stop keeping your little secret."

"I'm not quite enough of a simpleton to truly believe I could regain your affections by murdering your significant other, no matter how sorely I am tempted, every single time she lays a finger on you."

Will shivered, aroused and terrified and all the forbidden, delectable things he tended to get around Hannibal. "Good."

"Why *have* you kept my secret, Will?"

Will frowned, finally looking fully at Hannibal, finding tender yearning and confusion in his face. His hand was *so* close to Will's on the soft rug, if he just shifted over a little, their pinky fingers could cross, but that tiny touch would be his undoing. He could never be satisfied with one touch, one kiss, one night of passion, not when it came to Hannibal.

"I, um...don't know." He huffed a nervous, complicated laugh, drawing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them, more to keep himself for reaching over to Hannibal than anything else. "I keep thinking any day now I'll tell Jack. And then...I don't. That's so wrong, I can't understand myself, knowing that you'll go on killing people, innocents, and I've done nothing to stop you."

"I don't kill innocents," Hannibal argued softly. "But you're right that I've gone on killing. I always will. I don't want to stop, I like who I am."

"Unlike me, huh? Wasn't that always your argument, that if I *gave into* myself, I'd be a killer, too, and we'd be happy together, we'd be free?"

"An old argument, perhaps too encrusted with the blood and pain of the past to bring out on such a lovely evening." Hannibal's jaw tightened and he stared down at his own big, strong hands spread on his lap.

Will wanted to run one fingertip over the lines of veins on the backs of Hannibal's hands, follow the caress up those well-defined forearms, slide his fingers under the sleeves of Hannibal's sweater. He wanted to kiss him a thousand times, make love in front of the fire, uncaring of the public setting, he wanted it all to be okay again, he wanted to come home. But his morality meant he was locked out forever from the love of his life.

A long pause followed, both of them looking into the fire until their eyes stung with the heat and their unshed, held back tears. Still they stayed side by side, as if despite all the mess they had made, despite the way they were both spoken for elsewhere and shouldn't be dredging up ghosts of their romantic history, being side by side was the only truth that made sense.

"Do you remember our first Christmas together?" Hannibal asked, and Will's rigid, uncomfortable composure melted as he laughed.

"God, how could I forget? When we tried to go get our first Christmas tree together, and we ended up slipping on that damn ice on the road, stuck in a snow-ditch, waiting an hour for Triple-A to show up and save us…"

"We found ways to keep warm," Hannibal recalled playfully, leaning back on his hands in a more relaxed posture than he allowed himself with most people.

Will considered how warm, soft and wonderful Hannibal's lips would be if he kissed him then, both of their mouths still sugary from hot cocoa and cookies, and how quickly they'd only be able to taste each other as the kiss turned savagely passionate.

He remembered everything, too; the car heat kept them plenty warm when they were caught in that ditch, delayed from getting their tree. They should have known it was too snowy to embark on such an errand, but they were too excited about sharing Christmas to be careful.

Soon they were finding ways to keep even warmer, laughing, kissing and cuddling, listening to Christmas songs as the evening wore on and their rescue eventually arrived. *"I don't want a lot for Christmas, there is just one thing I need..."* Those seemingly cheesy Mariah Carey lyrics had felt all too magically real to Will at the time. They were always happy, he and Hannibal, as long as they were together. The heat between them could never be denied...Will feared it could only be deferred. Just that easily, they started to forget about their lifelong Christmas cynicism.

On their second try, they got a massive tree which just barely fit into Hannibal's impressive house, replacing that pathetic little table-top tree that used to be his only reluctantly polite acknowledgement of a meaningless holiday. The dogs had been delighted by the decorations and the holiday biscuits which Will had brought them, and he and Hannibal had jokingly argued about whether the dogs actually recognized and understood their holiday design aesthetic. Abigail had been there, helping them decorate the tree, learning to smile and relax again as she leaned on her new fathers' comforting presence to continue recovering from her trauma.

Will still emailed with Abigail sometimes; she had her own apartment now and was attending night college, still with the intention to go into criminal justice because screw anyone who said she was too broken to put her natural disposition for crime solving to good use. She still saw Hannibal, still thought of both of them as family, but she didn't pressure Will to come back. Without asking, Will knew she was aware of Hannibal's secret, too, and kept it for her own reasons, gratitude yes, but understanding, too. Who could understand a murderer's ways better than the daughter of a murderer who also had the primal urge for violence embedded in her DNA?

"In another life, in another world, maybe we're still together. With Abigail." Will wished he hadn't said it as soon as he had; it was a cruel idea to dangle.

"In that world, you accept and love yourself. I believe that's the only way in which you ever could have fully loved me. Or Abigail, for that matter, as more than your idealized surrogate daughter, as herself, flaws and all."

Hannibal always saw right through him; it was like open heart surgery with no anesthetic, it was like Will could never ever get away, no matter how far he ran.

"You lied to me, Hannibal, for so long. Do you know how much that hurts?" Will let himself use present tense; the time for artifice and pride on the subject was...not now.

"I'm so very sorry, my dear." Hannibal reached out and softly clasped Will's face, running his thumb over Will's stubble for a few heart-stopping moments before sensitivity to Will's wishes made him cease the gloriously enticing touch. "But you're equally adept at deception, if not more so, and with no one do you lie more laboriously than with yourself."

Will shuddered, miserable without Hannibal's hand on him, addicted and lost without more of him. "That's a very presumptuous, egotistical theory. You absolve yourself of all guilt by putting it on me and my stubborn refusal to become who I am."

“Perhaps you are right,” Hannibal determined sadly. He rose to his feet and looked down at Will with somber resignation, or an attempt at it. “Perhaps you really are the thoroughly ethical, upstanding man you wish to portray. Perhaps that’s the real you, and the Will Graham I loved is simply an illusion, distorted by the winds of time and my own selfish longing to have a true partner, the one I thought I saw in you. Because clearly, as per your narrative, there is no chance anyone could see the real me and still be in love.”

“Hannibal,” Will stammered, flustered. He got to his feet as well, eager to say something to make this less horrible, but Hannibal had already turned away, politely gathered his plate and mug and retreated in butchered pride and visible heartbreak.

“Good night, Will,” Hannibal called quietly, leaving the room without turning around again.

Will seemed to keep hoping the day would come that Hannibal would walk away from him, but not be able to resist turning back for one last look. He wanted Hannibal’s instinct towards self-preservation to crumble before the force of his love for Will, and he wanted to matter more to Hannibal than covering up his crimes or continuing them. But who would Hannibal be, if he wasn’t a killer? Had Will always known somehow, under the surface, and had *that* been one of the many reasons they were drawn together?

All he could seem to realize in this moment was that his love for Hannibal was a sort of sickness which he had fought to eradicate from his being with three years of separation and occupying himself in normal, peaceful pastimes. Yet for all that self-imposed rehab, he was just as helplessly enamored with his ex-husband as ever. Maybe now, tonight, he loved Hannibal more than ever.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal's line, "I remember everything," was inspired by Pacey on Dawson's Creek 😭❤️
I was listening to "Rehab" by Rihanna recently as well, which brought on Will's reflection on that particular metaphor.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter and thanks for reading! More soon, and this time Hannibal's going to be feeling much more defensive and closed-off to Will...whatever is to be done about that, Will??

Can we call a truce?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 22

The baking contest was a typically spectacular explosion of Christmas joviality, but Hannibal could not bring himself to care. He stood forlorn in front of his table, with his key lime tarts looking positively scrumptious. Common sense told him he looked quite splendid himself in a festive red zip-up cardigan, which surely humanized his otherwise imposingly regal features. Sad to say, he was scuttling along the bottom of the ocean floor somewhere inside his own broken heart, and could not have felt less like portraying himself as the proud creator of extremely high quality baked goods.

He didn't feel like himself at all.

"You're not looking like yourself today, Hannibal," that ridiculously imposing Edmund had the audacity to observe, approaching Hannibal's table with a gentle expression. Almost sympathetic, how dare…

Hannibal rearranged the perfectly symmetrical presentation of plates bearing tarts, so that now the display was perfectly symmetrical from a slightly different angle.

With pursed lips he declared, "It is increasingly exasperating that you continually choose to speak to me with such unwarranted familiarity, Edmund."

"Yes, it would be, wouldn't it?" Edmund laughed softly, "If it wasn't for…"

Hannibal frowned. "If it wasn't for the fact that somehow, against all reason, when we are conversing it seems that you know me very well, and we have been acquainted for many years. I find it difficult to properly resent your intrusive overtures of confidence."

"That's wonderful, Hannibal. You always did have pitch perfect instincts about people." Edmund admired the sign which Hannibal had placed on the table, written in thick, velvety green calligraphy cursive. "Your dessert looks delicious. But as I said, you don't look very happy at all. Does that have something to do with the way you have been avoiding Will since last night?"

Hannibal sighed, "I'm sure it has nothing to do with...why are you so concerned about my relationship with my former spouse?"

"I'd like to see both of you happy for the holidays." Edmund shrugged, "I guess you could kind of say it's my job, making sure guests enjoy themselves in more than a shallow way, but in a way that gets down to the heart."

“I see. Since you have meddled this far into the matter, and I seem to find it easy to talk to you for some highly baffling reason, you may as well know that I have failed completely in my attempts to woo Will back into my arms.” Hannibal stood stiffly, hands folded behind his back, belying his nearly casual attire and the supposedly “fun” occasion.

The judges were making the rounds, handing out prize and honorable mention ribbons, and it only seemed boring. Earlier that day, in an attempt to exorcise some of his soul-deep angst over Will’s latest rejection, Hannibal had murdered a particularly rude fellow contestant who had ridiculed his choice of recipe for not being “Christmassy enough.” Although the fresh meat had kept him busy making a savory French-style pie, Hannibal had not found one moment’s real enjoyment, either in the rather clean homicide (in such a public setting, strangling was really the only method that would do), the abrupt silencing of his victim (although the cessation of the shrill voice was a relief), nor even in his masterful cookery and the wicked game of sharing the delicious fare with fellow guests, then inwardly amusing himself with their enjoyment, little imagining they were engaging in cannibalism.

“None of the old thrills are doing it for you anymore, are they, Hannibal?” Edmund’s brows knitted and Hannibal looked at him in fresh surprise. It was almost as if he could read Hannibal’s mind, and yet perhaps it was more that he sensed the usually inscrutable therapist’s mood with exact understanding. “None of your usual tricks seem to be helpful either.”

“No, and it’s really quite discomforting,” Hannibal said dejectedly. “I had evolved an entire plan of complex manipulation to ensure Will’s affections were once again solely my own. I was going to sabotage Molly’s car when she went Christmas shopping, stranding her in town so as to allow me more time to be near Will. Yet I did no such thing. And I have not had the heart to physically portray my affection for Alana before Will’s eyes to try and drive him wild with jealousy. To be honest, Edmund, I do not understand what has happened to me; I seem to be disappointing myself and letting Will slip through my fingers.”

“Or it could be that you are wise enough to know you won’t win Will back the same way you lost him,” Edmund suggested.

“With lies and tricks,” Hannibal answered. “Ah. I had not considered…”

“You don’t have the heart to rely on those worn-out machinations, because you just want Will to see you. That’s all you ever wanted, that he would see you and love you unconditionally, the way you absolutely adore him.”

Hannibal blinked at the elderly bearded fellow, again questioning his own unheard-of patience in allowing the man to share such theories. Perhaps he was finally desperate enough that this stranger with his odd, almost mystical wisdom seemed a suitable candidate from whom to seek advice. At this point, perhaps he would have listened to almost anyone offering him an answer to the puzzles of his own heart and Will’s.

“Yes,” he replied quietly.

“And that’s honorable, Hannibal. You should be proud of yourself for making progress, trying to regain Will’s love through honesty.”

“I don’t want to be proud of myself for such weakness,” Hannibal sniffed. “I want to go back to my former life, wherein I was entirely self-sufficient and relied on no one else’s presence to feel continually pleased with the beauty and horror that life has to offer.”

How very upsetting, that the beauty and horror could feel so hollow and meaningless without Will there to share them, but surely he could still fight past this, cover over the hole in his armor.

“I see,” Edmund nodded, taking one of Hannibal’s tarts to go. “I suppose you’ll have to do what you feel is best, Hannibal. By the way,” he winked, “I voted for you.”

Edmund departed and Hannibal had to endure the judges coming up to his table to gush about his perfect key lime tarts and how they only wished they had a bigger grand prize and a category above “Grand” to bestow upon him. It was all so excruciatingly tiresome.

“Hey, congratulations,” Will said, appearing by Hannibal’s side and making the therapist suddenly want nothing more than to lean his head back and scream until his lungs were all worn through.

“Why are you here, Will?” Hannibal demanded wanly.

“Well, you wouldn’t talk to me when I tried to approach you at breakfast, or outside at the hot cocoa stand.”

“No, I wouldn’t. That is because I truly cannot fathom what more there may be for us to discuss, nor why you are suddenly interested in my company after abandoning our marriage and then avoiding me for three years. The subsequent explanation of my unlovable and despicable nature did not go unheeded, I assure you.”

“You won’t even look at me?”

Hannibal knew exactly what he would find when he gathered his strength and wounded pride to return Will’s beseeching gaze. Big, emotion-glazed blue eyes, pretty lips parted on a sad sigh, brows lifted as if to suggest, *really?*

He particularly disliked the way Will looked in that charcoal grey, mock-turtleneck fisherman’s sweater, so entirely *cozy*, huggable and yet untouchable. And so he kept his own features carefully cool.

“I’m looking at you, Will. Perhaps it would be best for you to accept this dubious proof of my respect, and to depart a baking contest which you are clearly trespassing upon, as neither a contestant nor a patron.”

“Come on, Hannibal. How much do the tarts cost, anyway?”

Hannibal’s caramel eyes very briefly journeyed upwards. “They are free of charge, Will. And you are well-aware I would never take your money.”

“No, you never would. Why did you do that anyway, during the divorce? Try and give me everything, even your house and your savings?”

Hannibal opted not to reply except with an annoyed huffy sigh. It ought to be obvious that his fortune and formerly delightful home meant nothing without Will, and therefore he would rather Will simply take it all away and leave him as decimated in life as he was in his heart and soul. Yet Will had refused, had left with nothing except what he had brought to the relationship, a comparatively paltry sum in the bank, the dogs, and the ability to make Hannibal happy, which no one else possessed. He hated the house now, but remained there out of masochistic insistence on remembering the wonderful times they had once shared within its walls.

Will grabbed a plate with a tart off the table. “I’m a patron now, see?” He took a clean fork from the table as well, then a quick bite of the tart made him almost moan, “Oh, God, that’s good, how are there any tarts even left by now?”

“I made extra, anticipating their popularity,” Hannibal answered crisply.

“Mmm,” Will sighed in a moment of irrepressible enjoyment of the tart flavor. “Alright, so I’m here to say I wish we could put all this mess behind us and just be friends. I’m sorry I was so hard on you last night, sorry we can’t see eye to eye.”

“How fortuitous, Will; you’ve finally landed on a subject where we are in complete agreement. I’m sorry, too.”

“But you don’t want to be friends?”

Hannibal tidied the now empty plates on his table, then stacked and re-stacked the cloth napkins. “No, I don’t want to be friends with you.”

“And you’d rather keep this insane tension between us than try to get along and part on good terms?”

Hannibal’s nails scratched across the length of the tablecloth; he stood fully again with his eyes hot and heavy on Will. “Yes. I’d rather part from you with this tension, with a lack of resolution, so that in some small way my existence still eats away at you. Perhaps you’ll forget me again when you return to your safe life with Molly and the dogs, fishing and repairing boats, keeping your mind free of darker visions and truths. But I’ll still be there, lingering at the very back of your mind, somewhere in your remarkably muddled heart, like an itch you never had the chance to scratch. I’ll hold onto you in whatever tiny way I can, Will, make no mistake about it.”

Will looked like an angel torn between heaven and a sinful descent; his pained indecision and incomparable beauty caused Hannibal’s stomach to somersault even as he stood his bitter ground.

“Fine, then,” Will muttered, neatly placing his plate back on the table.

The tart was half-eaten, and briefly Hannibal entertained the notion Will’s appetite was inconsistent again, as it was when they had first fallen in love and the overflow of emotion made him weak-stomached. He made himself let go of the idea; Will would never care about

him that much again, not now that he knew what Hannibal was, an unrepentant, insatiable killer and cannibal.

“Fine, Hannibal, you win. You win this argument and my feeble attempt to make peace with you, just like you won this contest without even breaking a sweat.” He flipped the bright blue ribbon on Hannibal’s sign, his anger and sadness all mixed together. “What else is new?”

“I haven’t won a damn thing, Will.” Hannibal’s chest was heaving, his face flushed, and his eyes again stinging with the humiliation of an impending public breakdown if he did not immediately depart.

Yet Hannibal still noticed how Will looked slightly aghast; he rarely ever swore. The only other times Will had heard Hannibal voicing obscenities were when they had gone to bed together, and then Hannibal had surprised himself by being quite verbose in his dirty talk.

“You could understand it all very clearly if you chose to,” Hannibal insisted, pulling off his apron and laying it over the back of the chair behind the table, rolling his sweater sleeves back down to his wrists a little too forcefully. He was never going to pass for his normal, composed self, but he could get this off of his chest, as it were, and that might form some small relief. “But you choose to ignore the truth and consequently hurt us both, with every opportunity.”

“I--” Will started, overwhelmed.

“No, Will, please, we’ve both said more than enough. If you see me again, keep your distance out of charity to us both.”

He stormed off, truly he could not lie to himself it was otherwise; he actually *stormed* off, like the heartbroken ex-husband he was. As he contained his wrathful, lusty disappointment to the extent of not *stomping* to the elevator, nor crawling into bed with the covers over his head, he supposed that he might as well pass a dignified day in reading, then skiing in the late afternoon before dinner.

Surely the Maple Oaks Lodge would not have another annoying event in store to bother him, when there had already been a baking contest that very day. If it had been that same contest which had cheerfully tempted him to choose this resort for the vacation, it didn’t matter now that the affair had proven such a pointlessly dull one.

Sitting miserably in his chair by the fire in his room, it distantly occurred to him that he could go up to the honeymoon suite anytime he wanted, as an upgrade to the superior lodging had been his prize.

He wondered if Alana would be excited about the change in accommodations, but then he had not seen her since breakfast, and until this moment, it had not even slightly occurred to him to wonder where she was.

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When Molly suggested ice skating that evening, Will guessed it was the least he could do. It was obvious to him by now that the flame between them, if it ever existed, had been well and truly doused by time and familiarity. He couldn't seem to bring himself to break up with her so close to Christmas, but he knew it might be crueler to string her along. Meanwhile, he was worried about Hannibal (silly, but true), who seemed so uncharacteristically down-trodden. It was awful to know he was the only one in the world with the power to heal Hannibal's broken heart, and worse to know how much he wanted to, when he couldn't do so without losing his own morality forever.

He felt torn asunder by painful indecision, but again he tried to smile and make light of the evening's activities. As usual, Maple Oaks had spared no expense to create a magical evening for their guests. The large pine trees that surrounded the ice rink were covered in dazzling Christmas lights that made the ice glow in pretty shades of red, green, purple and gold. The night sky overhead was perfectly clear, as if angels had hung the full moon and shining stars specifically to add to the festive ambiance.

"What a gorgeous night," Molly enthused as they took to the ice hand in gloved hand.

She had on a cute pink headband, her hair falling otherwise free around her shoulders, and a matching coat over white fleece pants.

"That's a great outfit," Will smiled as they began easily skating, falling back on years of experience.

They often went ice skating in the winters, back home in the more southern part of Maine where they had settled.

"Oh, thanks," Molly grinned in return, "Alana helped me choose it while we were out shopping today."

Will noticed that she blushed slightly when saying Alana's name, but he didn't think anything of it, too distracted by his own worries.

Across the ice, he saw Alana sitting on a bench and lacing up her own skates, looking lovely as always in a plush maroon coat over a short black dress with thick matching tights. She seemed more melancholy than usual, frowning, and if Will got closer he had a feeling her eyes would be slightly tinged in red.

"I'm going to go say hi," Molly told Will, who released her hand so she could skate over towards Alana.

Just then, as he continued skating a neat circle around the periphery of the rink, Will glanced up and noticed Hannibal walking through the snow nearby, looking deeply thoughtful and as if he thoroughly intended to avoid the ice skating.

"Hey," Will greeted, stopping by the edge where the rink met a railing. Although he was completely ignoring Hannibal's petulant request to be left alone, Will couldn't seem to resist. He rested his arms over the railing, his breath puffing visibly in the cold air. "What are you doing? Thought you'd be out here showing us all a thing or two."

“As a matter of fact,” Hannibal said, mildly embarrassed, “I suppose it never came up during our relationship, but I do not actually know how to ice skate.”

Hannibal was almost absurdly handsome in his soft brown overcoat, purple, black and gold check scarf, and black leather gloves. Handsome, out of his element, and anxious: a combination of traits which, on his normally pretentious and overly confident ex-husband, moved Will’s heart.

“Well, now we can’t have that,” Will smiled, a more genuine smile than he had shared with Molly. He felt almost like himself, inside his own skin and bones, especially when Hannibal relaxed slightly at his playful attitude. “You’ve got to learn, so you can be the best at it, like everything else. Come on, let’s get you some skates and I’ll show you what to do.”

Hannibal leaned heavily on Will’s arm as his former spouse guided him in the shaky first stages of learning to take to the ice.

“I’m going to fall,” he predicted, his lips pursed and cute worry lines showing up on his brow.

“Stop it, you’re fine, I’ve got you,” Will assured him. “Try to just melt into the motion, back and forth with the blades of your skates. Listen to the music, breathe the nice, fresh air.”

“The air is rather bracing, and the music an atrocious mix of contemporary, plastic-sounding festive odes to the sort of Christmas I am most certainly not going to have,” Hannibal complained, although he followed Will’s tutelage and let his body go looser, limber and more elegant with each movement.

He had a natural physical grace about him that made Will assume he’d be a terrific skater if he kept practicing.

The music playing from the speakers surrounding the rink had been traipsing through an excited medley of “Let it Snow!,” “Sleigh Ride,” and “Jingle Bell Rock,” but now the song changed to one uncomfortably familiar to Will.

"I don’t want a lot for Christmas, there is just one thing I need...I don’t care about the presents underneath the Christmas tree…"

Will’s cheeks were thankfully already reddened by the cold night, and he immediately looked away from Hannibal’s eager expression when they both recognized the song. It wasn’t the original version, but a slower, R&B-tinged version with tender vocals by a girl band. Actually, it had a nice beat that was easy to skate to, so Will tried to focus on that, and not the way his heart kept leaping, trying to bring up the past and make him admit this song represented their love.

“Does the memory of that night really cause you such discomfort?” Hannibal asked intently.

When Will finally looked over at him again, Hannibal’s throat bobbed as his eyes brightened.

“It was one of the happiest nights of my life,” the older man added in a husky tone that made Will’s spine tingle.

“Me, too, and that’s why it’s so hard,” Will admitted.

“I see,” said Hannibal, nodding. “I don’t know why I keep putting myself in this foolish position. My apologies, Will, but I think I’ll continue learning to skate on my own.”

“But you only just started--”

“I’m a quick study,” Hannibal insisted. “Please, you should go and find Molly now.”

Will nodded sadly as he let go of Hannibal’s arm. The last few lyrics of the song faded away, replaced by an equally sentimental cover of “Last Christmas.” Will’s heart seeked to be sinking somewhere beneath the ice, into fathomless black, freezing water, drowning, forgetting what it was like to breathe freely. He was suffocating himself with his own almighty conscience, and dammit...Hannibal was right. It never *had* made him happy, being good.

“*Once bitten and twice shy / I keep my distance / But you still catch my eye…*”

Jesus. Every Christmas song was out to get him this year.

“Hi, Will,” said Alana, skating up to him with a serious expression.

“Hey, Alana...have you seen Molly?” Will asked, forcing himself not to look back at Hannibal even though he was a little concerned his ex might fall on the ice.

“Well, yes I have, Will.” Alana pressed her ruby lips together, brows lifted in accusation, although her demeanor was free from resentment. “I think I’ve seen a lot more of Molly than you have since we all arrived. We spent the day together...she’s a fantastic person. Right now, she’s over there getting us some hot cider and donuts. We didn’t know if you wanted anything, because you’ve been too busy skating arm in arm with Hannibal.”

“I was just teaching him to skate,” Will explained, regretting the impulsive decision now that he more directly considered how it must look to Molly.

“Mmhm. Look, I just thought you should know that I broke up with Hannibal earlier tonight.”

“Oh, Alana, I’m sorry--”

She rolled her eyes. “No you’re not, Will. Trust me, you aren’t fooling anyone on this subject, least of all yourself. Here’s what I need to tell you, as a friend, as someone who cares about you and Molly -- if you want Hannibal, he’s all yours, okay? He always was as far as I can see, and I guess deep down I always knew it, too. But you need to be honest with Molly.”

He nodded guiltily. “I know that. I know I do.”

Suddenly the night felt a whole lot colder. He tucked his hat down over his ears more tightly, then fiddled with his gloves, pulling them snugger. But there was no getting away from the cold, dark pit in his stomach mixing nausea with yet more guilt and regret. Sure, he could be honest with Molly, as much as he hated the thought of disappointing her, but then...what the hell was he going to do about Hannibal?

Molly stood on the side of the rink, holding a tray with two lidded cups of cider and a bag of donuts on it, and Alana waved over to her, then nodded back at Will.

“Do the right thing, Will.”

She went to Molly and the two of them sat on the bench to share their snack. Will noticed that Molly didn’t bother waving or smiling at him this time, and he guessed she must be upset about the skating with Hannibal thing. Not that he blamed her. Alana was right; he had to explain it all to her (or as much as he could) soon, before she assumed he was merely a heartless, faithless bastard. At least they could talk it out and end up as friends, if he could get himself together and--

Just then, he heard Hannibal give a startled exclamation in Lithuanian, and a series of gasps all around him made Will spin around, only to discover that Hannibal had indeed made a wrong move that left him sprawled on the ice, his foot landing at an unnatural angle.

Plenty of other guests were rushing to Hannibal’s aid as he attempted to sit up, immediately wincing in pain and cradling his ankle. It was so strange to see him uncoordinated and a public spectacle like this, Will somehow could have cried.

His ex had enough help on offer, and didn’t need it from Will, yet his heart lurched and everything in him longed to hurry to Hannibal’s side.

Will looked over at Molly, who merely nodded for him to go to Hannibal. That was all he needed -- he rushed to Hannibal, who looked up at him with a jolt of surprised gratitude, his beautiful eyes glazed by automatic tears of pain at his injury.

Chapter End Notes

This is very Disney Channel of me, but I was thinking of the Cheetah Girls version of "All I Want for Christmas" and the Ashley Tisdale rendition of "Last Christmas" during the skating scene. Sometimes when I have my "Contemporary Christmas" playlist on in the background while writing, it be like that, you know? ❤️

More soon, thanks for reading and hope you're enjoying 💕 Coming up...Hannibal clearly needs some TLC, but there are a couple more twists to add to his and Will's already very complicated Christmas!

My love won't let you down

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Let me get my skates off, okay?” Will said gently, and Hannibal nodded.

He sat down quickly on a bench and slipped from skates back to boots. “Molly,” he said when she approached with a silently stricken expression. “This won’t take long, I’m just…”

“The one he needs,” Molly concluded. “And you need to help him. I’m going back to the lodge, okay? See you later.”

Will felt a pang in his heart at her deep melancholy and Alana’s steely stare in his direction, as if she had appointed herself Molly’s protector. So odd, but he had the sense of stars aligning to their proper positions, as if the two women were meant to be side by side while he stayed with Hannibal. Either he was losing his keen empathy, or Alana’s concern for Molly went beyond friendship. Who should be better able to notice feelings of powerful affection in others, than a man who had let love destroy him and tempt him back for yet more damage on what was left of him? Will only wondered how he hadn’t noticed the deepening bond between Hannibal’s ex and his own clearly soon-to-be former girlfriend, but then again…

It had something to do with the cannibal over there on the ice, surrounded by concerned witnesses to his fall, hamming it up with noble resignation to his ordeal. Will sighed. It was always all about Hannibal, wasn’t it?

As Will approached again, Hannibal swallowed, too prideful to fully show how much pain he was in with all the strangers around. “Please, everyone, I am quite alright,” he explained, “I’m a doctor, and I can tell that this is merely a sprain.”

“Come on, Doctor,” Will invited with a small smirk. He carefully eased Hannibal's skates off, occasioning his ex a brief grimace as his eyes squeezed shut, and placed the therapist's boots back on, leaving the one on the sprained ankle looser, making the executive decision not to put any pressure on it. Hannibal let him do all of this without comment, relying on Will's judgement despite his higher expertise.

Then he leaned down and helped Hannibal up, groaning at the older man’s weight falling against him in need of help. It all hit him at once, the irresistible scent of Hannibal’s spicy cologne, the heat of his body so close, needing him, choosing only to accept Will’s assistance...and of course, the goddamned smug, arrogant look on his face.

“I told you I would fall,” He almost pouted, fully in “poor baby” Hannibal mode now that they were alone.

“You told me you were a quick study,” Will reminded him as he began helping Hannibal limp towards the lodge. “I forgot about what a terrible patient you are, Doctor.”

“Please stop calling me that, Will. You know it has a certain effect on me, and I’m far too annoyed and pained at present to be entertaining such thoughts.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Will answered, exhausted already from the struggle that was getting his big, strong ex-husband all the way back indoors across the thick snow that made the journey even harder.

“They say it takes one to know one, Will,” Hannibal said, and then their eyes met and they both melted into laughter.

Hannibal got a little too confident and put more weight into his next step on the bad leg, prompting him to moan in pain as Will gripped him more tightly.

“Easy now,” Will soothed, “It’s only a little further.”

“Thank you, Will.” Hannibal replied, and Will knew that the soft emotion in his eyes was real, not the artifact of impenetrable perfection he tried to show the world.

“Oh, dear, dear, dear,” Edmund clucked when they lumbered awkwardly inside, Hannibal dragging his wounded leg with a delicate martyr’s sigh. “I see there’s been an accident. We do have an on-sight doctor, if you’ll just follow me to the infirmary. With the risk of skiing mishaps around here, we’ve found it’s best to be prepared.”

Will nodded, “thank you,” and accepted an assist as Edmund helped support Hannibal’s weight on the way. Hannibal’s face fell slightly at realizing he wasn’t going to be dramatically leaning only on Will for the rest of the way, and Will would have kicked him if he wasn’t already injured.

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“Come here, you big baby,” Will said an hour later as he helped Hannibal into bed in the honeymoon suite. “The doctor said it’s only a mild sprain. In a week, if you rest up, you’ll be as good as new. Looks like you’ll just have to suffer through a few extra days of luxury here at Maple Oaks.”

“It doesn’t feel ‘mild,’ I assure you,” Hannibal frowned, heaving himself up onto the amazingly soft mattress of a huge, gorgeous antique wood-framed bed.

The bedframe was adorned on both ends with elegant loops of pine, dotted in white fairy lights, and the bedding was a plush, pure white that brought out the simple but gorgeous winter aesthetic of the room. Will tried not to think about the champagne sitting in a bucket of melted ice nearby, nor the pretty, bright red rose petals which the staff had generously sprinkled all over the floor leading up to the bed.

He couldn’t help thinking of their own honeymoon, which had come after a whirlwind courtship, Hannibal and Will meeting at work and fighting to keep their hands off of each other for only a few weeks before surrendering to the hot desire to rip each other’s clothes off and test how long two people could kiss until parting for breath. From there, they’d just wanted to be together every moment of every day, or at least that’s how it seemed to Will,

who had harbored little suspicion of what Hannibal did when they were apart, who he hurt, whose lives he tore apart.

Their honeymoon suite had been located at a decadent resort, tropical as this one was wintry, that room done up in deep shades of red. The bed was heart-shaped, and there was an assortment of strawberry flavored treats on the table beside it...chocolate covered strawberries, of course, and even strawberry lubricant.

“Wow, this place is *really* something else,” Will had remarked, doing a double-take at the cheesy, over-the-top excess of it all.

“I had no idea it would be quite like this, Will,” Hannibal said, his smile angelic and a wickedly intent gleam in his eyes telling Will he had known perfectly well, and wanted Will naked and debauched on the heart-shaped bed whilst he hand-fed him strawberries, then fucked him until he couldn’t even move.

And that was exactly what he got, to their mutual delight on that night filled with laughter and teasing, quickly disintegrating into lusty moans and delicious friction. It was the first and only time in his life before this that Will had been on vacation. Their honeymoon was like a distant echo of the idea of happiness to him now, not a memory he could let back in unguarded. He was a fool back then, buying every one of Hannibal’s lies and manipulations because he didn’t want to see the truth. This didn’t excuse Hannibal’s deception, of course, it just made Will feel even stupider for letting their love go on so long when very deep down, he knew something wasn’t right.

He shook off thoughts of the Maldives, of long white beaches and their toes in the sand, fingers interlocked as they strolled with nothing to do but simply exist within their delicate, unsustainable happiness. He would not linger on sultry nights rolling around in bed, insatiable for more and more of each other, nor on Hannibal’s boyish grin as he surfaced from turquoise waters and waved to Will, who was further back. As if they couldn’t even be apart for a few minutes without Hannibal being irrepressibly blissful to catch sight of him again.

“How you suffer,” Will said blandly in the here and now, “My heart just breaks for you. Now, lift up your leg a little for me.”

Hannibal did so with a wince and a muttered declaration in Lithuanian that sounded none too pleasant. Will slipped an extra throw pillow under Hannibal’s ankle, then retrieved an ice pack from the bag of supplies they’d gotten from the doctor.

His expression softened slightly, as Hannibal’s pain really did seem genuine.

“I’m sorry, I can see you’re really hurting. You know, it’s so damn hard to see where the line is between truth and deceit and melodrama with you, Hannibal.”

“Admittedly, I have a habit of making it difficult for you, although you see through my disguises as no one else ever has.” Hannibal muttered this through gritted teeth, having trouble acclimating to the bed and dealing with his immobility. “I don’t know how I can possibly last a week like this,” he fussed.

“It’s not like you have a choice, Nancy Kerrigan,” Will said, his gently amused smile helping Hannibal to relax ever so slightly. “Now, why don’t you take some of the painkillers they gave us?”

Damn, he hadn’t meant to say ‘us’ like that, as if they were still married.

Everything about this *felt* married, the domesticity getting through to Will’s heart so easily, it was almost as if he’d been waiting for an excuse (however inconvenient and weird the excuse, but this *was* Hannibal, after all) to feel this way again. Maybe those walls he’d built with the rubble of his mental anguish and emotional ruin had never been so sturdy...even if he wasn’t ready to let them fall just yet.

“If I must,” Hannibal consented, tossing his head back on the huge pillow behind him, his eyes closing in pained acceptance of his woeful circumstances.

“Doctors really do make the most atrocious patients,” Will observed wryly.

He found bottles of water in the minifridge and opened one, placing it, along with two small blue pills, on Hannibal’s nightstand.

“Perhaps it would seem less absurd if you were the one with the sprained ankle,” Hannibal huffed, tossing the pills into his mouth and chasing them with the water, almost haplessly rushed and less refined than how he would usually do it.

Will hated to see him suffering, which was crazy because how many people had suffered merely as a result of Hannibal’s selfish machinations, himself included? Furthermore, his haughty ex was putting on the performance of a lifetime, sulking and needy, rather than just admitting that he was in so much pain he didn’t want Will to leave him. Yet even that, even the stupid drama, was so cute that Will felt his resolve not to get drawn back in weakening by the moment.

“Now just *try* to be a good boy and relax like the doctor told you,” Will instructed, sitting down on the bed beside Hannibal, resisting the temptation to take his hand and stroke it soothingly.

“You didn’t have to stay with me, Will,” Hannibal observed rather mistily. It was apparent he was growing woozy on the pills.

So, the medicine worked fast. This could be interesting. And how hilarious that Hannibal, of all people, should have a low tolerance to drugs, although Will was too distracted with other things to laugh at the moment.

“Well, I did stay,” he shrugged. “Hannibal...why didn’t you tell me that you and Alana broke up?”

“Was the point?” Hannibal slurred drowsily, his eyes half-lidded. “You don’t care.”

“You make it exceedingly difficult to show I care,” Will accused, his tone quiet as Hannibal sank further into the bed, broad shoulders finally relaxing in acceptance of impending

slumber. “There’s all these rules and conditions on it. I can only say I care if it’s to get back together, to embrace my supposedly murderous nature, to forgive you for all the insane lies and manipulation you put me through. It’s not good enough if I care enough to want you to know just that: I care for you, despite what you did.”

“Despite what I...am,” Hannibal added, mumbling something else in Lithuanian before his head lolled on the pillow and he blinked up at Will briefly, remembering his train of thought. “You can’t love...the real me...it’s just as I feared...and why I lied...tricked you. Sorry, I...couldn’t help being with...you as long as I could fool you I was...someone worth loving, worthy of you.”

Will rushed to answer, pain at Hannibal’s words constricting his heart, but his ex-husband had fallen asleep at last, a sad look lingering on his face.

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Will kept telling himself he would stay a little longer...and a little longer...maybe a few more minutes just to make sure Hannibal was okay. But really, who else was going to make sure Hannibal had something to eat when he woke up restless and starving in the middle of the night (room service? Sure, but how would Hannibal get to the door and arrange the food? It was almost as though Will didn't see the crutches against the wall, was unfamiliar with his former spouses’s ballet-level grace and ability to physically navigate a challenging situation, or was just that eager to be the one to take care of him).

Who else would help Hannibal to the shower (with eyes carefully averted at key moments of nudity of, course) and make sure he didn’t slip and fall by standing right outside it, then help him to dry off and get into his pajamas?

“You kept these?” Will laughed, guiding Hannibal’s arms into the white pjs with a candy cane pattern.

“I really am fearfully sentimental, Will. I’ve kept all of your gifts, whether they were intended as a joke, such as this attempt to procure me the ugliest Christmas pajamas, or in earnest. Prior to my relationship with Alana, I wore our wedding bands on a chain around my neck every day.” Hannibal looked down at the buttons he was fastening on his shirt and not at Will’s astounded face as they stood by the bed.

“Where are the rings now?” Will questioned, fascinated, guilty for reasons he couldn’t understand -- did he feel badly for abandoning Hannibal and running away, did he feel cowardly for not sticking it out when he learned that the monster within him had a match in his husband? Or did he feel guilty for still being here when he hadn’t had a real talk with Molly to end things properly?

Yes.

“In my suitcase,” Hannibal admitted. “I was tempted to put them back on earlier, but...I’ve been trying to convince myself there won’t be any miracles this Christmas.”

Will helped him back into bed and sat down with a baffled sigh. “You told me you *needed* a miracle, now you’re trying to forget the whole concept. And me...I’ve been swinging back and forth on a pendulum between holiday cheer and resignation to complete personal defeat since I got here.”

“Well,” said Hannibal, letting Will arrange the pillows behind his back and prop his ankle again, “Happy holidays, Will.”

They watched random 2am Christmas specials on the sleek flatscreen, and just the amount of effort it took not to snuggle against Hannibal’s chest and *bite* him, kiss him and find a nice, gentle way to make love without hurting his ankle...it had Will wrung out past exhaustion. They joked together about George Bailey’s denial over wanting anything but Mary, and whether or not an angel really got their wings every time a bell rang. Hannibal fell asleep by the time George was crying his eyes out on the snowy bridge, so Will pulled a blanket up over his ex’s long legs, mindful not to touch the swollen ankle.

He would just stay for a few more minutes in case Hannibal needed one more thing, whatever it might be. Just...another...minute…

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December 23

A knock at the door made Will jolt upright in the lavish bed of the honeymoon suite. He’d fallen asleep in a borrowed pair of Hannibal’s grey lounge pants and a maroon sweater that hung loosely on his slighter frame, all smelling of his ex to an undeniably arousing extent. Groggily, he processed the fact that he’d drifted off without realizing it, slumped in a half-seated position, and Hannibal’s head had made its way over to his lap, Will's fingers tangled in his ex-husband’s silky, silvery hair.

“Shh,” he soothed when Hannibal stirred at the noise and his sudden movement. “Just rest, I’ll go see who it is.”

He went softly to the door, opened it to find Molly, and gave her an apologetic look, not even bothering with any foolish phrases such as “I can explain.”

“Molly, I’m so sorry, I fell asleep…”

“Nice pjs,” she snarked. Then she caught herself in surprised dismay: Molly *never* snarked. “God, this isn’t me. I’m not this bitter, cynical person, Will, and I won’t be.”

Even now, at her angriest, she spoke in a whisper, so as not to wake Hannibal in the early hours, Hannibal who she must be pretty pissed off at right now.

“You’re the nicest person in the world,” Will acknowledged, closing the door behind him as he stepped into the hall to converse with her. “I never deserved you.”

“That’s bullshit, Will,” she sighed, crossing her arms.

She was dressed simply in some thrown-on grey sweats, her hair tossed atop her head in a loose bun, but she was still lovely, blue eyes glowing with sadness, cheeks flushed with it, too.

“I’m just a person. I try to be a good one, and you’re a great guy, you just don’t want to ever see that for some reason. You’re always punishing yourself, and it hurts everyone around you. I’ve watched you having fun with me and genuinely wanting to fall in love with me, all while you’re just *dying* inside, and I can’t do it anymore. You’re wearing me out. I need someone who only wants me, and who loves themselves, too.”

“You’re right,” he admitted, biting his lip. He raked a hand through his curls and wished he had one damn thing to say containing wisdom or helpful words to make this easier on her. Maybe he’d done that already, just by being a selfish ass who couldn’t see what he wanted or needed until it was too late, and even now was determined to keep fighting it.

She didn’t have all the facts, but her words still rang clear and sharp as the brightest bell on Christmas morning.

“I usually am,” she laugh-cried, and Will did it with her, then they hugged.

“I don’t know what he did to hurt you so badly, and I know it does hurt so much, Will,” she said, tucking her small face into his shoulder, patting his back. “But you love him, and this is your second chance to work it out. Those don’t come along too often, you know? Sometimes you never get them at all.”

They drew back from each other, and Will couldn’t explain. This had always been the worst part, his resolve to hide Hannibal’s secret along with the dirty truth of his own repressed, beastly nature that longed to kill alongside his ex and paint the world bloody with their exuberant destruction. He had to bottle it all up, contents under pressure, and it made him beyond miserable, but he did it for Hannibal. That was what he told himself, he was protecting Hannibal, but...was that the only reason?

“Will you keep in touch?” he asked, tugging at her sweatshirt sleeve.

“Yes, of course I will. You know Glenda will have the dogs until New Years, then I’ll go pick them up. Take the time you need before you come and get your half of the pack,” she smiled, and the smile was pained with the memory of them combining their dog families -- Will’s five dogs, plus Molly’s three sweet-natured mutts.

But they knew the relationship would leave them both with more good than bad, the sense that they had been in each other’s lives when they mutually needed recovery, stability and quiet company. They had grown beyond that need now, and maybe that was just fine.

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“This really is some suite,” Will observed when he came back into the room to find Hannibal sitting up in bed, looking at him in concern.

“Will--”

“Look at this place,” Will gestured at the high, rustic exposed wood ceilings, the charming, yet fancy array of snow white and berry red in the decor, the big Christmas tree sparkling with fragile snowflake ornaments in the corner by the door to the huge balcony. “It’s the perfect, most romantic Christmas destination, don’t you think? Shame for it to go to waste like this.”

“Will, I know that you and Molly…” Hannibal tried again.

“Well, at least we can save this,” Will suggested, grabbing the expensive champagne from the thawed ice and finding room for it, lying on its side in the minifridge. “It should still be good to drink at some point. We could toast to everything, Hannibal, wouldn’t that be fantastic?”

“You’re angry,” Hannibal noticed, tossing the covers off and sliding down to the end of the bed closer to where Will was pacing. He let out a small groan of pain in moving his foot, then kept his big, heartfelt amber eyes locked on his rampaging ex.

“Yes, I’m fucking infuriated, Hannibal, and you know why? You.” He pointed at Hannibal.

Will’s cheeks were tinged in red, his curls still rough with unintended sleep that hadn’t been enough; light circles under his eyes spoke of an ongoing sleep deprivation that made Hannibal’s heart sink.

“I’m sorry--”

“Oh, you’re *sorry*?” Will repeated in disbelief, nearly spitting the words. Hannibal was taken aback -- even when he found out that Hannibal was the Ripper, even when he left, all the way through the divorce and the very last time they saw each other, Will never got heated, never raised his voice or cried. He had kept himself locked down to a stubborn, festering, miserable repression that hurt Hannibal more than anything.

It was the knowledge that Will refused to know and accept himself, that he would rather suffer than just live his feelings, even if he wanted to scream and throw things at Hannibal, that made the older man so distraught and hopeless. If being honest meant not loving him, that was fine, but to know Will condemned himself to an empty life of wasted potential and muted suffering was worse than any more rough punishment or Hannibal's own broken heart over losing his husband.

So he was glad now, to see Will raging; it was almost as if he started to breathe again himself for the first time in over three years. Perhaps he’d been trapped under the same solid ice of deprivation and denial as Will all the time...perhaps there was no way the two of them could ever truly be parted; they suffered together or thrived together, no in between. No escape, but Hannibal would rather be trapped than even be able to imagine a life wherein he never met Will.

“You’re sorry. Hannibal the Cannibal is sorry.” Will ran a hand harshly over his own face as the speed of his pacing increased. The he stopped in front of Hannibal and jabbed a finger in the air towards him. “You ruined my life. You said you loved me, you made me happier than I ever even knew I could be, and you destroyed every bit of it with your repulsive, despicable, unforgivable and horrific *games*--”

“Yes,” Hannibal admitted, meeting Will’s gaze, accepting him once again as judge and the executioner of his frail remaining aspirations of winning him back. “I’ve never met a true equal before, and I thought that if I could slowly help you, over time, to blossom into the glory of your becoming, my previous deception could be forgiven. And I couldn’t resist you, Will, I was and am yours, entirely.”

“I had to lie to *everyone*!” Will roared, his eyes red around burning blue. “Everyone I respected and cared about, I lied to Jack, Beverly, the whole team, I lied to Alana, I let her remain blind enough to your nature that she actually *dated* you, and now I’ve hurt Molly.”

“A regrettable outcome,” Hannibal said reductively. He was almost urging Will on by now, so proud of him, needing Will to let this happen, let it all out, finally.

“Regrettable? Fuck you, Hannibal, it’s horrible. She doesn’t deserve that, and we could have been great together if it wasn’t for you and this terrifying, incomprehensible vice grip you still have on my heart. I hurt her, and I’m hurting you because I can’t forgive you or accept you, and you have ruined everything I hoped for -- or else I did, and you just made me see that, and, and---”

Will’s lips wobbled; a spasm of despair took him over from head to toe. “It hurts,” he cried, giving in at last as tears cascaded from his haunted eyes. He fell to his knees and Hannibal reached for him, drew Will's face to his middle, petted through soft curls as Will sobbed and rubbed his face against Hannibal’s stomach, then his thigh. He cried and cried, his body heaving until he almost vomited with the force of releasing so much repressed emotion.

“I know it hurts, my darling,” Hannibal murmured, massaging his back and shoulders, roving fingers attentively through his hair in a comforting rhythm.

“I can’t hide anymore.” Will looked up at him through eyes ravaged by tears, his voice reduced to a desperate rasp.

“And that’s scary. I know.”

“It hurts so much, there aren’t words.” Will collapsed fully to the floor, his back to the bed, close to Hannibal’s uninjured leg where it hung beside him. He let his head fall to Hannibal’s leg and sighed, wiping his wet cheeks on the sleeves of the cozy red sweater.

“Will, people are going to come and go from your life. You’ll go through phases, and you will either grow or remain stuck in unfruitful soil. People will hurt you, and I’m sorry to add myself to the number, I know I’ve done it the worst of all. And you’ll hurt others, because that is an inevitable result of human nature. It will be harder on you than most, as you take every responsibility onto your own shoulders. You may reject me once again, and again I will keep my distance, give you your freedom, let you decide what to do with mine. Consign me to a prison cell if that is your sentence, the resolution of your fierce sense of justice. Or simply imprison me in myself, parted from you. But if you should ever need me, you may always tell me so and I will come to you without question. I will do anything for you; I would give my life in a heartbeat if it would please or help or save you. And if by some unforeseen miracle you are able to find a way to forgive my past idiocy, my cruel folly...I promise that my love will never let you down again.”

Will couldn’t summon words in reply, but he let the speech sink into his skin, uncertain if it was more rife with poison or the remedy to save his pathetically flailing life of forced goodness. Loving Hannibal was madness, but possibly the only cure for Will, if he could only be brave enough to accept it. He merely stayed where he was, letting the last few sobs wear down what was left of his energy, hoping that when it was over, for the first time in his life, he would know what to do with himself.

Chapter End Notes

Now that Will finally let it all out, we'll be heading out of the angst and back into fluffy times next 🥰 Thanks for reading, more soon ❤️

Mine again

"You know what's rarer? Second chances. I never get a second chance, so what happened this time? Don't even know who to thank." --Doctor Who

"*Would it be enough if I could never give you peace?"* -- Taylor Swift

***

Molly ran into Alana as they were both checking out, their rolling luggage planted beside them, Edmund giving them brief, knowing smiles as they closed up business.

"So, where are you going now?" Alana asked as they headed out of the lobby and into the crisp air of a new day.

Molly paused with her suitcase beside her on the sidewalk. She glanced to the SUV she once shared with Will, knowing he wouldn't mind if she took and kept it; knowing, in fact, he would expect her to do that. He had his own ride to wherever else he was going, that much was clear.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry, it's just…" Alana considered, playing nervously with the keys in the pocket of her mulberry coat. "I hope that however you spend your Christmas, it's a happy one."

"You know what?" Molly shrugged. "My only thought was to find the closest cute bed and breakfast, climb into a soft bed and watch Christmas movies."

"That sounds perfect." Alana grinned, adjusting the shoulder strap of her purse, and Molly bit her lip.

"What, uh...what are you gonna do for Christmas?"

"Hmmm…" Alana considered. "You know, I really thought -- for months now -- that I just wanted creature comforts, that I was so autonomous that's all I needed. Someone like Hannibal, all he ever gave me was superficial, no matter how generous, and it was never enough for me. I never knew how much I needed something more, not that I questioned deserving it, but...I think breaking up with him made me realize what I *want.* And that's enough of a Christmas present for me. Thought I'd just go home and simmer in the juices of my self-analysis," she laughed, and Molly did, too.

"You're not very spontaneous, are you?" Molly asked, and Alana laughed harder: "No, definitely not."

"But if you wanted to put off your self-psychoanalysis for a little longer and come have Christmas with me…" Molly blushed; Alana's face lit up, and they had that magical moment of realizing they both wanted the same thing, doubt and confusion evaporating into relief and excitement.

“Well, you could. I’d be happy to spend it with you.” Molly looked so cute, Alana thought, proud of herself for going out on the limb of asking, and it was a bit too soon for a kiss, but maybe sometime. Sometime, that would be so nice, like coming home in the most unexpected place. Like Christmas was full of surprises, some of them extraordinary enough to make up for the harder ones.

“I saw an adorable B&B on the way up here,” Alana smiled broadly, lifting her hand in black leather glove, “Toss me the keys, I’ll drive.”

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“I’m going for a walk,” Will announced, finally, when he was done crying. “Will you be alright on your own for a bit?”

“Certainly, Will,” said Hannibal, recognizing the need for him to take his fingers from Will’s precious dark curls and move his other hand from his beloved boy’s stress-stiffened back and shoulders.

Crying hadn’t unleashed all of Will’s true self; it was merely the beginning, like turning the key and pushing the door open, but not going in. Hannibal knew it was vital he give his ex-husband space to consider his feelings and future decisions, despite the fact that it drove him near-wild to think of being apart again now that Will had been -- however briefly -- clasped in his arms where he belonged. But then, he must acclimate to the possibility that Will’s thought process might end in another separation. If he could hardly bear to be away from Will for “a bit,” however was he going to survive a sequel to their last parting, when there was no way to know how long it would be before he could be near him, see his sweet face and feel the enticing heat of his body, smell that woodsy aftershave and realize how his snobbery about finer cologne faded under the power of this incomparable attraction. Simply to linger in Will’s presence would be enough, even if they were never lovers again, just to be his friend and have the priceless gift of his trust, his intellectual conversation -- he missed their long, deep talks so much. It was hard for him to decide what part of being with Will he missed the most, but he supposed that dwelling on the topic would only make this worse. He must be brave and strong again, hold his ground -- keep the promise he had made in their wedding vows, to be true to Will until death (and beyond, as far as he planned, far beyond), wait forever if necessary.

All of these contemplations passed quickly, his gaze on Will’s pale, tear-streaked face shifting from desperately needy to calm and understanding. It had to be about Will needed.

“I’ll have breakfast and make a few calls to patients,” Hannibal determined, sitting back against the pillows pressed to the headboard of the bed, taking his phone from the nightstand with as casual and non-obsessively possessive a demeanor as he could summon. “As it appears I’ll be off my feet for the most part until after the new year, I had better postpone my late December appointments.”

“Hey,” Will said firmly, “You ice that ankle in a little while -- you want me to do it before I leave?”

Hannibal smiled, his eyes gently crinkling as Will kept sniffling and wiping at his wan face, still taking the time to care if Hannibal would be alright.

“Mylimasis,” he intoned huskily, unable to help the endearment which he had not used in so long.

It made Will look at him with intent but unreadable emotion. How his beloved held such multitudes, as Whitman might say, completely unpredictable, his presence all the more addictive to Hannibal because of this unique quality. Will was intense, his empathy rendering him so sharp and sensitive that to most people he seemed a misanthrope. They could see Will's outer beauty, but not his awe-inspiring set of inner complexities.

“I have it all well in hand,” Hannibal added belatedly, after they had stared at each other for a few heart-staggering moments.

He wondered when he would feel truly calm again, or if such a thing was even possible in Will’s proximity. Perhaps peace was overrated; it had never held much appeal to him, although before Will, Hannibal had not realized that he would even put his own well-guarded, organized cover life into jeopardy, risk it all, simply for a chance to be with him.

“Okay,” Will said, taking the kleenex which Hannibal passed him, smiling ever so slightly. “Don’t forget to take your medicine if you need to.”

“I’m fine, Will. Be on your way,” Hannibal answered in a sparkling, teasing tone. Honestly, how could anyone take one look at this beguiling boy and not flirt, even a little?

He feigned looking at his phone as he really kept watching Will, who put on snow boots, his black peacoat, and a dark blue scarf that made the color of his eyes pop.

“Don’t forget your hat and gloves.” Hannibal spoke with his eyes still seemingly trained to his phone in dutiful concentration (all that the screen currently displayed was the “Spam” section of his Mail inbox). His husbandly comments were just as notable as Will’s own solicitude towards him, and it made him feel warm, if not content, not calm, nowhere in the stratosphere of peace.

“Right.” Will nodded and obeyed, causing Hannibal a few choice flashbacks of more sultry occasions on which his ex-husband had joyfully given into his dominating nature.

A subtle but strong spark of desire lit up his cinnamon eyes when he glanced at Will again, and Will gave him an awkward flutter of fingertips vaguely resembling a wave “goodbye for now.” Then he turned and left, closing the door of their lavish honeymoon suite behind him with a quiet click.

”Their” honeymoon suite, really. Hannibal chided himself, annoyed at his inability to at least try harder to contain his overwhelming need for Will to belong to him again. His thoughts painted everything with the golden haze of hope no matter how he tried to be sensible or even use his pride to rise above falling harder in love than ever. Still, the only way he managed his excessive anxiety over what Will might conclude while out walking and pondering life was to tell himself, *He won’t be gone long. He said it would only be a bit.*

His ankle throbbed with pain, but he opted not to dull his senses and render himself sleepy again with more pain meds. Yes, he would be perfectly fine waiting here for Will to make up his complicated mind. For a bit.

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When Will returned around 4 in the afternoon with his face so cold he almost felt like an ice sculpture, he didn't see Hannibal still resting in bed, or in the comfy armchair near the Christmas tree.

Puzzled, he peeled off his coat and winter accessories, stuffing the gloves into his pockets and jamming it all onto a hanger in the closet with haphazard distraction, where was Hannibal? The crutches were missing, the balcony was vacated, the bathroom door was open so he wasn't in there...unless…

A quiet splash of water made Will guess Hannibal must be doing something incredibly stupid, and in a flash of possessive frustration, he charged for the bathroom.

Hannibal looked up at Will with an obnoxiously innocent expression, batting damp eyelashes at his former spouse. He was lounging in the hot tub in the large, extravagantly luxurious bathroom, naked save for a pair of skimpy black swim trunks, and Will was *not* going to stare at his sexy upper body, his pectorals and dripping, dusky nipples, that scratchy-soft, silver-strewn chest hair. He wasn't going to remember how it felt to sit in Hannibal's lap and kiss him until they rocked their hips together, hard and hungry, hands roving wildly all over each other's bodies.

Instead, he focused on this: "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm soaking in the hot tub, Will, I would have thought it was self-evident."

"What if you had trouble getting out again and hit your head?" Will demanded, "What if you drowned because you were so silly and impulsive that you couldn't just wait for me to get back before--"

"I had no idea if or when you would be returning, Will."

Hannibal's voice was dry and dismissive, yet the fire in his eyes suggested that Will's solicitude gave him a thrill, even inspiring him to push it a little in return. This handsome, sophisticated doctor who could so easily intimidate others turned into a petulant cat craving attention when Will was around, and dammit...Will wished he had even a little immunity built up to the cuteness of it and the sweet thrum of power he got off of Hannibal's obsession with him.

His ex-husband continued in a smooth, smug tone, "And as I have crutches and a mind which I have it on good authority is quite impressively intelligent, it did not seem beyond my abilities to indulge a therapeutic pastime. I had to do *something* to fill in the time after I had breakfast, completed all of my business, re-read several chapters of the only book I brought along as well as a sizable excerpt from a collection of Dickens Christmas tales which I located in the nightstand drawer. After that, I had lunch and watched a puerile but mildly

entertaining film about a young boy who wishes to receive something called a 'bb gun' for Christmas. You may trust me when I say that within these hours...and hours…"

"Okay, okay, I was gone for a while," Will groaned, rolling his eyes with his back resting against the doorframe.

He still wore Hannibal's clothes, the collar of the maroon sweater loose enough on him that it almost slipped off one shoulder, and Hannibal watched this possibility quite intently. It made Will feel heat coming back into his chilled face. He remembered this sweater, already rendered extra soft and a bit baggy, even on its owner, from going through the wash so many times over the years; it was always his favorite of Hannibal's clothes to "steal" and wear.

"You said you would be absent for 'a bit,' so I hope you will forgive my restlessness and boredom," Hannibal suggested. His cheeks were slightly pink from the heat of the water, and his hair dampened.

The big, fancy hot tub really did look appealing, but Will decided it must be the long time he'd spent traversing wintry woods that made him crave sinking into the soothing water as well. It was therapeutic, after all...whether or not said hot tub also contained a handsome serial killer he was no longer supposed to be in love with.

"You're just full of clever speeches today, aren't you?" Will shook his head.

"This latest monologue has reached its conclusion. Now, are you coming in or not?"

Will couldn't help it; he let out a bright laugh.

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"I'm sorry I took so long, but there was a lot to think about," Will explained a few minutes later as he settled into the tub, blushing at the feeling of Hannibal watching him.

He'd eased into the hot water with a delighted sigh of comfort. His muscles were aching from anxious stiffness and the very long walk that had taken up almost the whole day. There had been a brief respite from the cold wherein he popped into a few random gift shops in the small town he'd walked to in his listless wandering, turning the matter of himself and Hannibal over and over in his mind. And while in those stores, he had found himself buying a few small gifts for Hannibal, not knowing why, when he hadn't been able to reach any real conclusions.

Maybe the conclusion was, as Hannibal would say, self-evident: here Will was, after all, sitting in a frankly fantastic jacuzzi in his underwear, right next to his problematic and irresistible ex.

"And yet you have not made a definitive choice regarding our -- that is, regarding your future," Hannibal said, his brow furrowing.

Will knew he was upset that he had stumbled over that sentence; despite English not even being his second language, Hannibal still almost never made mistakes or had trouble

stringing a sentence together. It was clear Will had him that tangled up in confused desperation, and this made Will want so badly to be able to offer answers he just didn't have.

What if there were no answers?

"Why do you keep waiting around for me?" Will asked, his voice soft. He shifted position to sit a bit closer to his ex, who swallowed hard in contemplating the question.

"I would wait forever, simply for this. For the chance to be near you, talk to you, and to know you do not hate me, that it isn't completely impossible you might one day bear me some regard. Don't you think this is nice, Will? Only to be here like this, both of us possessing no idea of the future, but everything we need right now. It's rather infrequent in this life that one has the chance to feel this fulfilled."

You're not fulfilled, you're broken-hearted and yearning. But you're going to pretend this is enough, if it's all I can give you.

Will's eyes, still sore from his sobbing earlier, pricked with new tears. "This *is* nice," he admitted.

"The only thing that would make it better," Hannibal mused, licking his lips slowly and raising Will's temperature in a way that had nothing to do with the envelopment of the steamy water, "Is if we each had a glass of cabernet."

"Oh," Will chuckled, God he'd been curious about what other improvements Hannibal might suggest. Hannibal looked so sexy with his lightly wet hair kissing his brow, a teasing smile on his plush lips. "Yeah, that'd be great, except...I'm not sure I would trust myself if I had a glass of wine right now."

"Alcohol is rather notorious for lowering inhibitions. What are you so afraid of, Will?"

"You remember." Will's smile faded as his heart slammed his ribcage; he moved even closer to Hannibal so that their wet legs were almost flush, their arms inches away from touching.

How had he ever fooled himself there was something better in life than this, the exhilarated sensation taking him over, the way he could never calm the fuck down in Hannibal's presence, but *had* to have all of the man he possibly could, and then so, so much more?

"Wine makes me reckless, and my tolerance isn't all that high. If I had a glass or two of wine, I might do something…" Will leaned in and nuzzled his face into Hannibal's, just barely holding back for one more moment of intolerable tension, his lips a whispered sigh away from Hannibal's. "Something like this."

He kissed Hannibal, and universes exploded behind his eyes. Hannibal moaned and grabbed the back of Will's head, immediately gripping his curls and kissing harder, the two of them wantonly groping, fingers flying to all the sensitive places they remembered with startling clarity, but this was beyond all the forbidden and resentful and passionate fantasies. This was the reality of Hannibal's warm, perfect mouth, how he was the most amazing kisser, stroking his tongue against Will's own, alternating this with bites on Will's lower lip, tugging the

sensitive pinkness of Will's mouth with feverish possession. All the planets and galaxies and logic in Will's philosophy decimated, reassembling themselves in a new vision of wild power and light. Hannibal grazed Will's hard nipples with clever fingers, rendering them aching and taut; Will climbed into his lap, muttering, "Am I hurting you?", remembering his ankle, but Hannibal breathed back urgently, "No, don't stop."

Hannibal grabbed Will's ass, squeezed and massaged his curves through his wet underwear, and Will moaned as his erection brushed against Hannibal's own. They kissed again and again, hot, sweet and bruising, too much, and there had never been a sanity to this love, a chance for either of them to be independent or satisfied without the other. Their need was bottomless, and Will realized they couldn't even be themselves alone.

Will raked his fingers hard through Hannibal's chest hair and groped his pectorals, the kisses getting harsh, deep and wet. Hannibal's lips were as soft as he remembered, his love as darkly consuming -- Will broke off from his mouth only to lean in and kiss his neck, shifting downward so that their hard-ons stroked together through their soaked, clinging shorts.

"Will," Hannibal moaned, fingertips on Will's shoulder blades, tracing over dripping skin, like remembering the details in an exquisite work of art.

Will couldn't help thinking that Hannibal was trying to commit him more accurately to memory, that he assumed the palace of his own reminiscence, his secret treasure, would be the only place he would feel this again. The younger man's heart thudded relentlessly, the sound filling his ears along with Hannibal's moans getting both louder and weaker, and when he licked, bit and sucked at that beautiful neck, Hannibal whimpered.

"You okay?" Will said breathlessly, looking at his gorgeous face with searching grey-blue eyes in the soft white light of the room. "Is it your ankle? I shouldn't put so much weight on you--"

He started to shift off Hannibal's lap, but his ex-husband stopped him with frantic hands on his hips, "No, don't go, don't --" He took a deep breath, trying and failing to center himself, because he took in Will's scent, both of his familiar aftershave and his desire, his excitement, and it made the breath stutter. "Please."

He cupped Will's face and kissed his lips until Will thought he would explode from bliss and the urgent craving for much more.

"Hannibal," he sighed, "It's okay, I'm here, oh, God, mmm," it felt *so* good to be kissed by Hannibal, it was a struggle not to get carried away and forget to address the older man's state of near panic. "Hannibal, please tell me if this hurts, we'll just move somewhere else, it's fine--"

"Yes, it hurts, Will," Hannibal murmured, his eyes hazy as he placed Will's hand over his heart, which hit like a repeated bullet train against Will's palm. "Because I want you so much. I miss you so terribly, my love. Your kiss, your touch, are like the sweetest electricity, burning me up and making me whole again. To think you'd want this…" He ducked his head, his hair cloaking the self-conscious look in his eyes. "Want me…"

“Okay, baby, okay. I want you, you're all I want,” Will soothed, the sound of his own voice mildly startling him; he had never expected to use this term of endearment with anyone again, much less the only one he’d ever called ‘baby.’ This wasn’t about gently poking fun at Hannibal’s vulnerability, but protecting it, soothing his fragile neediness, claiming Hannibal as his once again. Will loved the way it felt, but Hannibal’s heavy breathing and shivers still had him worried.

“Has it been a while?” he added softly, “You seem so sensitive.”

He brushed his knuckles over Hannibal’s elegant cheekbones, down to the soft stubble that had grown in recently on his chin. It looked so damn sexy on him, a shiver went down Will’s own spine at the sight of him, the devil brought down to earth, never more stunning than in this moment, this beautiful defeat at Will’s hands.

Hannibal shuddered, snuggling automatically into Will’s touch. “Yes, the sex with Alana had long since become infrequent.”

Will nodded, stroking his hair, tracing his already kiss-swollen lower lip, slightly baring his pretty, sharp teeth. “Me, too. With Molly, I mean.”

At the sound of her name, Hannibal growled, clutched Will’s back and kissed him again, making them both moan even louder, the sound echoing off the walls, Hannibal’s tears salting Will’s lips as he licked into his ex-husband’s mouth. Hannibal tugged his hair and muttered hotly between kisses, “Mine.”

Will didn’t say “no,” not only because he didn’t want to, but because he had no intention of crushing Hannibal, hopefully ever again. But he wasn’t ready for a commitment to this, not knowing what it would entail. He knew himself, knew the brutal truth of his murderous hunger which he had so dutifully buried. Being with Hannibal, seeing him in totality, accepting him in deed and word as he already did in heart, despite his resistance, it would dig up Will’s own darkness and send it raging into the world. How could he unleash that danger, not knowing how to control it or who might be hurt in result?

“Mmm,” he sighed again, God Hannibal tasted amazing, felt so wonderfully strong, warm and hard against him, wrapping Will up in his powerful arms until Will could want nothing more than to be possessed by him, disappear into their obsession, forget how to breathe air they didn’t share.

“I just..need to slow down a little,” he murmured, careful to watch Hannibal’s reaction and make sure he didn’t frighten him with thoughts of another rejection.

“It’s fine, Will,” said Hannibal throatily. “Please, don’t feel you have to look after me. I know that when it comes to you I can be...perhaps more than anyone should have to handle. We can take this as slowly as you need, stop altogether if that is what you--”

“No, I need to...Hannibal, I don’t want to stop,” Will explained, gliding his hand over Hannibal’s shoulder, feeling along the hard lines of muscle in his arm, doing his own memorization of the sublime. “I get so carried away with you, and I want to be fully aware of

my decisions before I let that happen entirely. Can we take a break, go get some dinner, maybe just...talk?"

"Of course," Hannibal agreed, letting his hands go limp by his sides, fingers fisting under the water, the only way he could hold himself back from grabbing Will for more kisses. "Yes, I'm quite famished, and dinner would be delightful. Your company and conversation will be even better."

"Hmm, then," Will smiled, easing off his lap but pausing before getting out of the tub, running his fingertip again over Hannibal's cheek, letting his touch slide down the wet skin of his face.

Will had the feeling he was the only one who could do this, tease and comfort and possess this beast who would demolish anyone else who attempted such a move. Hannibal belonged to him, and whatever happened, Will promised himself never to lose sight of how precious this was, nor how much he needed Hannibal, ever again.

"It's a date," he added, and the shy way Hannibal grinned at him made Will feel wonderful, fluttery and elated, as if this was their first date all over again.

The Promise

Chapter Notes

cw: some violence in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What’s the worst thing that could happen, when the worst thing that could happen could be the best thing ever?” -Tove Lo

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“Will, you’ve barely touched your food,” Hannibal observed, looking resplendent in a suit of silvery grey as he and Will enjoyed a candlelit dinner at Maude’s.

The dim room was amazingly romantic in ambiance, with sparkling snowflake decorations hung from the ceiling, crimson table cloths, gold candle votives on the tables and yet another beautifully cozy fireplace crackling nearby.

Will paused with his fork hovering over his roast turkey dinner. “It’s just that there’s so much I want to say to you, I don’t know where to start, and I’m feeling anxious. It always seems to go right to my stomach and make my head spin.”

“What does, Will?” Hannibal smiled gently, brows raised.

“You do, Hannibal. You go to my head like I’ve had about ten of these.” He lifted his glass of red wine and Hannibal blushed, his smile turning from intrigued to flattered and excited.

“The feeling is quite mutual, as I have let you know with rather excessive detail of late.”

They both laughed and Hannibal added, “This is your time to tell me of your feelings and wishes, and I promise to listen attentively. I do recall an era wherein it seemed to occasion you no trouble to ask me for what you wanted. You must already know you may ask me for anything I can give, and it will be yours.”

“Well, that’s the whole dilemma. I have to make sure I ask for the right thing. Back when we were married, it often seemed as if you could simply intuit what I wanted, give it to me without a second thought. I used to think...I used to *know* I was so lucky to be with someone so caring and attentive.”

“This realization caused you to struggle with your previously ironclad thoughts of unworthiness,” Hannibal noted. “To which it would appear you have returned in my absence. It saddens me to think of you not being properly taken care of, and of you experiencing a moment of doubt that you are simply the most beautiful and important person--”

“Come on,” Will laughed, cheeks turning pink as he set his fork down, sat back in his chair and fiddled with his navy tie. “If you had your way, you would make me so conceited…”

“That’s my goal, among several others.” Hannibal’s voice caressed the words as he surveyed Will with far more hunger than he could spare the excellent meal on the table.

Will had paired the tie with a pair of matching slacks, a paler blue shirt and a navy Christmas sweater with a pattern of small reindeer dancing across stripes of tiny snowflakes. Hannibal could not help reflecting that this attire would look atrociously tacky on anyone else, yet Will looked as distractingly handsome as ever.

“You’ve dressed as if you are finally getting into the spirit of the season,” Hannibal prompted, getting back to his own meal of pan seared beef tenderloin in a cherry balsamic sauce.

“I thought maybe it was time,” Will admitted, looking in continued surreal disbelief around the gorgeously festive room, at Hannibal framed in flickering candle-glow. “I’ve started thinking... what if I roll the dice on believing in the impossible. And this time I let it keep rolling, forget about all my obsessive micromanaging ethics? I have spent most of my life coiled up in knots over it.”

“I don’t want you to live that way,” said Hannibal with possessive certainty. Will met his heady gaze full-on. “Whether or not you are with me, I want you to open yourself up to life, allow yourself freedom of expression.”

Will nodded, then took a sip of wine as he tried to process the astonishing possibilities presented to him by their reunion. There was no way Will wanted to be that version of himself, finally, without Hannibal there to teach, guide and adore him, to witness the Becoming he had lovingly nurtured and dreamed of. How could Will be his most authentic self without the man he loved by his side? How could he let Hannibal go again after tasting his lips, feeling his love hardening beneath him and those demanding, perfect hands roving his body? And it was clear as day that Hannibal had never let Will go, had allowed him physical distance and to do what he liked while pining so desperately…

“I’ve forgotten how to want to be loved in any other way than the way you love me,” Will murmured, his heart thudding pleasurably. *For better or for worse, and maybe the worst is the best part.* “Let’s start from there.”

“Nothing would make me happier,” Hannibal declared with that prideful little boost he always got after being encouraged by Will.

He was like a school-boy with a crush around Will, always, and it reminded Will enticingly of why he had used the pet names “Daddy” and “baby” for Hannibal with equal frequency.

“Now, you shouldn’t be drinking wine on an empty stomach,” Hannibal added authoritatively, creating a scrumptious forkful of the cuisine on his own plate: beef, brussel sprouts and mashed potatoes, the bright red juices of the medium rare meat mixing with the cherry glaze to drip appealingly from the offering.

“Why not try a bite of my dinner?” Hannibal lifted the fork across the table towards Will with an expression as slyly expectant as it was tender and bossy.

Will couldn’t decide if Hannibal was most lovable when overwhelmed by the glow of returned affection, or bold enough to “daddy” him in public, but he himself was quietly giddy and painfully turned on. Why hadn’t they made love in the hot tub? Will had postponed their reunion in a fluster of indecision, and it had only made his desire for Hannibal burn brighter, relentless, intense, needier than he had allowed himself to feel in years.

He parted his lips, leaned in and accepted the bite of food, batting his eyelashes up at Hannibal, humming in pleasure at the taste.

“There’s a good boy,” Hannibal praised.

Oh, God... How Will had missed hearing those words in that luscious, husky voice.

“Want to try mine?” Will asked, glancing down at his plate while trying to downplay his burgeoning erection out of basic public decency.

“Oh, Will. I thought you’d never ask,” said Hannibal with a devilish grin.

***

Will didn’t suppose they had actually decided anything, except that they were happy and needed to get upstairs to Hannibal’s suite to express the sentiment, post-haste. But Will felt himself changing, growing into a new sense of faith in possibilities. He didn’t need an answer or a key to suddenly make life sensible and clean. The danger and joy they would be together was everything he needed to feel alive, and this Christmas he had gradually opened up enough to let life back in, see himself through Hannibal’s eyes and stop smothering the adoration he felt in return. That was a big step forward, and more than good enough as a start. They were falling, and with Hannibal, Will was content to keep falling, no matter where they landed. They would be together, and that was all that mattered.

To get from Maude’s back into the main hotel building, they had to cross a small yard’s worth of fluffy Christmas snow which glittered under the moonlight, crunching under the movement of Hannibal’s crutches.

“Careful now,” Will urged, “It might be slippery.”

“If I had known it was this easy to have you solicitous and fretting over me, I would have tried ice skating years ago,” Hannibal teased, glowing with happiness at Will’s attention.

“Right, just don’t go hurting yourself again, you don’t need the excuse to get my *solicitude.*”

Will smirked, sexy in the moon sparkle as the grand lodge ahead of them looked like a winter castle. New snow began gently cascading from the star-studded heavens, the sky above them azure and magical.

“Moments like this, immersed in the cold, fragile yet striking solitude of winter, often seem to exist outside of time,” Hannibal observed, looking up to let fresh snowflakes fleck his

lashes.

In the moonglow, his normally severe features were transfixed by wonder.

“Like an echo of a dream,” Will murmured, pausing beside Hannibal to take in the scene. “Hannibal, we’re not going to run out of time. I’m not going anywhere.”

He laid his gloved hand over Hannibal’s own where the older man’s fingers held onto his crutch. Unusually enough, Hannibal’s only response was to keep listening, still intent on the bright full moon and the snow which was beginning to fall more steadily.

“I don’t know exactly how it’s all going to play out, how we can make this work. But I know the only thing that matters to me now is trying.” Will smiled, warm reassurance gleaming from his eyes.

After all, he had promised to love Hannibal forever, and like an eternal flame he never had a chance of extinguishing, the love still blazed inside him, only grown stronger through the trials of time and both of their destructive mistakes.

Hannibal gazed, once again marveling at his ex-husband’s beauty, and Will said softly, “The only thing missing right now is some mistletoe.”

“You don’t need the excuse of mistletoe,” Hannibal began, shifting a little closer, looking far more debonair than anyone should while hobbling around with a sprained ankle.

Snow dusted both of their coats and got caught in their hair as Will leaned up and brushed a tentative kiss to Hannibal’s mouth, holding him steady.

The air was bitingly cold, but Will was warm from the inside out, just with one exquisite Christmas kiss. He was really turning out to be a huge dork about this whole holiday romance thing himself, a suitable match for Hannibal, after all.

“We need to get back to the room,” Will laughed, and Hannibal just smiled at him in besotted bliss.

But just then, they were accosted by a stranger who came hurtling at Hannibal, seemingly out of nowhere, although in reality they had been so caught up in each other that both were left unusually vulnerable despite their expertise in detecting danger and defending themselves.

“Where’s my wife?” The man -- middle-aged, balding, nondescript but for the rage in his eyes, grabbed Hannibal and pushed him back against a tree, sending the crutches flying. “What have you done with her?”

Hannibal gritted his teeth in pain but pridefully didn’t cry out; Will rushed to him and shoved the stranger back.

“How dare you?” Will demanded, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your partner argued with my wife yesterday before the baking contest, and that was the last time anyone saw her,” the man explained. “So he’s going to tell me what he did with her *now*

before I beat the hell out of him."

"You have wisely concluded that you have no evidence with which to accuse me before the authorities," Hannibal replied smugly, straightening his plaid scarf which had become disheveled in the brief attack. "Now, if I might invoke my own theory on the topic, perhaps your wife simply left you. I cannot say it would be a questionable decision on her part--"

"Son of a bitch!" the man exclaimed, hauling back to punch Hannibal, but Will grabbed him by the fist and around the waist with a fierce grip.

"You leave him *alone,*" Will muttered, his voice so frigid and menacing that the stranger dropped his fist.

Will released him, but the stranger dipped a hand into his own coat pocket and came back out with a knife. He threw himself towards Hannibal with it, and Will knew Hannibal would most likely be able to protect himself, even injured, with lightning fast reflex and consummate hunting skills, but it was a risk Will couldn't take.

"I said don't *touch* him!" Will repeated with a terrifying snarl, ice burning deep in his bright blue eyes.

He yanked the man back from Hannibal, tossed the knife to the snow and deftly got his arm around the stranger's neck, cutting off his oxygen while holding him tightly from behind.

The man's feebly inexpert attempts to fend Will off grew even more so as his air supply slowly but surely dwindled and he made jerky, rag doll movements, helpless in the grip of Will's strong arms and deadly instincts.

As the stranger fell to the ground with a snow-muffled thud, Hannibal stared at Will in wonderment, still resting his back against the large oak tree. Will stood over his victim, quick panting breaths spilling from his lips, tears of terrified ecstasy in his eyes.

A rough, beautiful, sweet rush of pure adrenaline, joy and power coursed through Will's veins; he was high on the violence and only wished it had lasted longer, that he could have been more brutal without the risk of getting caught.

The stranger's eyes were wide open as he lay flat on his back, creating a twisted image of a snow angel.

"Will?" Hannibal asked in concern, pulling himself back from expressing his joy at Will's beautiful behavior because he knew also of Will's guilt complex and must handle this with the utmost sensitivity. Whatever Will needed from him…

He stumbled over to a very dazed Will, unconcerned with the quick darts of pain shooting through his leg when he quickly had to press weight on his sprained ankle on the way. Instead, he was intent on Will's feverishly elated face, his eyes frenzied with shock and confusion.

“I...had to,” Will repeated, still staring at the man he’d killed. “If he would have kept going, with you fighting him on that bad foot, you could have been injured even more severely, taken longer to walk again or gotten a limp…wait, your crutches.”

Will snapped out of his bafflement at the sight of Hannibal trying to move without proper support. He scooped up the crutches and arranged them carefully, although with shaking hands, under Hannibal’s arms as his ex-husband went along, gazing at him.

“You would prioritize my mobility over a man’s life?” Hannibal asked softly, “Knowing, as of course you must, that I killed his wife.”

“Hannibal, *yes*.” Will trembled as he cupped Hannibal’s face and ran his fingers over a sculpted cheekbone, then the soft spikiness of stubble on his ex’s jaw. “I’ll always protect you. You’re mine to protect.”

Oh, my love… Hannibal’s heart soared. He could not have asked for a Christmas gift more precious than to hear Will say those words.

“How do you feel?” Hannibal asked first, before tending to the corpse or worrying about the strain in his leg and smarting in his back. The ache of a hunt was a sensation he always embraced in any case, and his primary concern was Will, as ever.

“Like this is exactly what I needed,” Will said with a strange, haunting laugh that would have sent most people running, but made Hannibal draw closer, enraptured. “It’s what I’ve been waiting for. I want more, Hannibal.”

He kissed Hannibal, still keeping it soft and slight; they were both aware it would be perilous to be carried away by lust in the here and now, but the temptation was powerful. Will’s hand tightened on Hannibal’s shoulder and he moaned, “I want more, with you. To hunt with you, feel this way all the time. I think it’s why we were made.”

“Yes,” Hannibal smiled tearfully, pressing fluttery kisses all over Will’s face, leaning into the younger man. It was an awkward balance with the crutches, but he wouldn’t have changed one detail about this moment for anything in the world, any previously cherished ideal of perfection, organization, safety or certainty.

“Yes, my darling Will,” he repeated, his voice throaty with adoration tantamount to worship.

“We have to stop,” Will shivered, “God, it’s so hard to stop. I don’t know how I ever did it in the first place. But the body…”

“Yes, someone could pass by at any moment.” Hannibal glanced down at the corpse with clinical analysis of their situation. “We are only lucky to have encountered this ruffian whilst passing a shadowy and tree-enclosed section of the grounds. At any rate, we are going to have to move him to the cellar entrance, just there, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to help as much as I’d like, Will.”

Will frowned over at the outer entrance to the basement, which comprised a pair of heavy, rust-colored steel bulkhead doors. It was a brisk walk away, almost a stone’s throw, but this

was going to be harder while lugging a corpse. “Okay. I’ve got it. You keep a lookout, I’ll take care of getting him over there.”

“‘Ruffian,’ by the way?” Will grunted as he began lugging the stranger towards the cellar doors, “You murdered his wife over a baking rivalry, and *he’s* the ruffian?”

“A ‘rival’? Will, please don’t misunderstand,” Hannibal clucked, calmly resting on his crutches as he kept a razor-sharp lookout lest anyone approach the scene of their corpse disposal. “That woman had absolutely no chance of defeating me in the contest. However, she offended me with her rude remarks, and whenever feasible, it is always so very wonderful to eat the rude.”

“To eat the…*Hannibal*,” Will groaned, pulling the heavy dead body a little closer to his destination.

Will bore every appearance of a man who had just discovered that his husband had been slacking on the housework. “You *ate* her, too? When the hell did you even have time?”

“The organs, I removed and baked in a french-style pie, which I served as an impromptu luncheon for my fellow contestants,” Hannibal explained frankly. He kept his voice low but audible to Will in the shadowy yard, conveniently empty but for themselves.

“The rest of her, I conveyed to the very same large and highly useful furnace to which we are currently headed.”

“But when? I mean, you looked perfectly collected at the contest, aside from arguing with me, of course...and I saw you so soon afterwards at the skating rink.”

Will pulled the doors open and dropped the corpse unceremoniously down the short set of stairs leading to the cellar floor. There was a crunch of broken bones when the dead body landed.

“I’ve never quite been able to conceive how you commit these crimes under this immense time pressure,” Will continued, and Hannibal approached, letting Will help him step by step down the stairs.

“She insulted me prior to the contest,” Hannibal explained in the dark basement. He reached up to click a light on overhead as Will pulled the doors shut behind them. “At which time I strangled her when we were alone in the kitchen, locked the door, removed the organs and placed her body in a locked closet, made the pie, went to the contest and argued with you, served the pie to my fellow contestants, returned to the closet afterwards when again alone and deposited her in that furnace there, went back to my room where Alana broke up with me, then went ice skating with you, and well, Will. You know the rest.”

“Jesus, Hannibal.” Will chuckled darkly. “You’re one of a kind.”

“You flatter me, my love.”

Hannibal opened the doors on the huge, wood-burning furnace wide as Will put all of his strength into heaving the corpse one more time, into the blazing inferno with a last feral shove. He shut the door, just barely evading the flames himself, and let out a long, shaky breath, sweating now.

“You really shouldn’t look at me like that while I’m shoving a corpse into a furnace, Hannibal.” Will maintained, unable to wipe the saucy grin off his face as he pressed his hands to his knees and took a few deep breaths.

“I’m not sure you are allowed to blame me when I’ve never seen such a wonderful sight...well, with perhaps a few exceptions.”

“Oh, right, right,” Will groaned, rolling his eyes, obviously loving this highly inappropriate lapse into flirtation.

“Naked exceptions,” Hannibal clarified as they made their way to the stairs leading from the basement to the kitchen.

“Thank you, Hannibal, I managed to put that together.” Will laughed whole-heartedly.

He stayed behind Hannibal and helped him gingerly ascend the stairs. With his doctor’s expertise, Hannibal knew how to step up with his strong leg first, raise the crutches in each arm and follow with his weak leg, knowing that if he should stumble, Will would catch him. And they managed, by the same miracle of gravity that had held them all night, to make it intact, without Hannibal falling backwards into Will and both of them ending the holiday season in the clinic.

Will was flushed with triumph as they emerged into the kitchen. “I can’t believe we did that,” he marveled.

“I can believe it,” Edmund’s voice responded as they noticed him standing by the oven, frosting a tray of sugar cookies.

The St. Nick look-a-like gave them a mildly stern expression, but appeared neither angry nor afraid; he went back to squeezing green frosting from a bag with a decorative tip to create a small, precise pattern of stars across a cookie’s red-frosted surface.

“You’re both lucky you didn’t fall down and twist a few more ankles, or worse,” Edmund tsked.

Will looked at Hannibal; Hannibal looked at Will. Once again, rather than attacking, they were both inclined for some reason to hear the man out.

“Now, I’m very happy to see you boys working together, the way it was always meant to be.” Edmund put down the green frosting and began embellishing the cookies with shiny little red sprinkles, the sound of the shaker almost like sleigh bells. “But Hannibal, you really must work on controlling your temper. That incident at the baking contest, really.”

He shook his head.

“I suppose I was somewhat rash,” Hannibal admitted, following the odd urge to be honest that always seemed to emerge in the mysterious elderly man’s presence.

“You certainly were. It was quite unlike you to be *that* reckless,” Edmund replied. “But I looked the other way because I knew the real reason was because you were missing Will so terribly, and as a matter of fact, that woman you killed, Gertrude?” He shook his head. “She’s been on the naughty list for decades. Exceptionally rude, I must agree, and her husband Richard, too.”

“Edmund, just who the hell are you?” Will asked, exhausted with wondering.

“You already know who I am, Will. You always have, even in fourth grade when Tommy Gibbons said I wasn’t real and you cried behind the school at recess. I’m sorry about that, by the way; he did get coal in his stocking that year.”

Will’s jaw dropped. “Tommy Gibbons? How could you possibly know that?”

Edmund tapped the side of his rosy nose with a warm smile and twinkling amusement in his blue eyes.

“More to the point,” the bearded man continued, “Hannibal, I tend to cut you a lot of slack in the list determination every year because you really do have a knack of thinning down my naughty column.”

“Your…” Hannibal, even indomitable know-it-all Hannibal, could do nothing more than linger on his crutches beside an equally bewildered Will and squint, as if he must be seeing and hearing things. “Your...naughty...list? Is this some kind of elaborate role-play designed to enhance the holiday experience?”

“You can decide that for yourself,” Edmund answered matter-of-factly. “But I do ask that you save any further extracurricular activities, and you know the kind I mean…” he dragged a finger across his own throat to emphasize the point as Will and Hannibal again exchanged confused glances. “For *after* you check out and leave my resort. I don’t want to find out that there have been any more unexpected accidents regarding my guests, boys, is that clear?”

“I mean...okay?” Will agreed, and Hannibal nodded, “Very well, Edmund.”

“Now, please be honest with me,” Edmund said, lifting the tray of cookies and showing it off thoughtfully. “How did they come out?”

Chapter End Notes

Murder husbands back in business! Next up, it's about time Hannibal and Will went back to their room...✨✨

It's always been you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Back in their room, Will helped Hannibal into the bath and stayed with him this time, the two of them lazily cleaning each other with a loofah of peppermint bath gel, exchanging kisses that progressed from languid to hotly passionate, their hands wandering more and more, desperation returning to them.

“Let me help you to bed,” Will murmured, pulling back from Hannibal’s over-kissed lips with a delighted smile. “I’m going to take care of you all night, okay? I want to make you feel so good, Daddy, but I won’t risk hurting your ankle any more.”

Hannibal shivered in response to what Will had called him. “Please, Will...please…”

“There we go,” Will smiled after they dried off and he helped Hannibal to bed. “You just lie down and relax, let me take care of everything.”

“Will,” Hannibal moaned. Will’s low voice, the sweet Southern drawl dripping into it like candy, made him tremble as much as his lover’s beautiful hands, slowly grazing up and down his calves, caressing and teasing.

Will made sure Hannibal’s ankle was propped on a small pillow, checking to ensure the swelling hadn’t gone up any. “Looks like you’re still healing fine, albeit slowly,” he murmured, one hand drifting up Hannibal’s other naked leg, almost to the hem of the white towel which -- much like Will -- was his only attire. When he squeezed Hannibal’s shapely thigh, the older man threw back his head with a deep groan of need, the visible bulge of his desire poking impatiently against the soft terry fabric of the towel.

“It’s a good thing we have this enormous, strong, cozy bed, Daddy,” Will said with that same coquettish lilt that made Hannibal shudder and reach for him with shaky, clinging, demanding hands. “A bed like this will stand up to what I need to do to you.”

“Will, when my ankle is fully healed, I’m going to fuck you so hard that you scream until you can’t speak for days,” Hannibal muttered hotly.

“Daddy,” Will moaned, softly kissing his way up Hannibal’s legs, opening the towel to expose the older man’s aching, throbbing erection. He trembled, not only from the sight of the hot, thick, uncut cock soon wrapped in his eager hand as Hannibal slipped a hand into his curls with a wanton moan. It was also the sound of Hannibal’s ragged, rough dirty talk, driving him completely fucking insane like always. “I need you.”

He used the precum dripping from Hannibal’s cock to lubricate the glide as he gave him a few long, knowing pumps, remembering exactly how he liked to be touched, how Hannibal’s cries of pleasure -- the vulnerability and need he would show no other -- urged him on to dizzy elation. Kissing and biting at Hannibal’s thigh, he lost his own patience with teasing

and licked a broad stripe up his cock, then swirled his tongue around the tip, savoring the salty, musky taste of the hot, hard flesh before sinking his mouth over Hannibal and taking him almost all the way in with one fluid motion.

“Good boy,” Hannibal moaned, already panting because he was so sensitive with touch deprivation and obsession with Will, “My good boy knows just how to please Daddy.”

He gripped Will’s damp curls hard and fucked into that gorgeous mouth that wrapped around his girth so eagerly, angelic lips stretched, pretty cheeks sucked tight to give him pleasure, the wet, perfect heat of him making Hannibal need to come so badly, but he wouldn’t, not yet and not when he still needed so much more of his precious boy.

Hannibal tugged Will’s hair in just such a way that was a well-known signal between them. Will pulled his mouth off with a naughty moan of deprivation, staring up at Hannibal with his eyes ablaze, dark, wet curls framing his face. Slowly, he licked his lips and sighed with enjoyment.

“You taste as good as ever, Daddy,” he smiled, and Hannibal pulled him closer so that Will could hover over him for several long, sucking, biting kisses that left their lips red but no pleasure, however dark and deep, could be enough, and they were just getting started.

Hannibal pulled Will’s towel off and tossed it away with a growl, spanking Will, reveling in the feral smack of his palm against the soft, lovely curves of his lover’s ass.

“Yes,” Will whimpered, nibbling at Hannibal’s neck, grinding his own urgent erection against Hannibal’s weeping length. The whimper turned into a weak mewl when Hannibal traced a finger between his cheeks to tease his hole. “Oh, fuck, Hannibal. *Yes.*”

“Come here, sweet boy,” Hannibal beckoned, the roughness in his voice betraying his desperation.

Will moved closer, traced Hannibal’s plush lips with his wet, hard cock, long and beautiful and soon pushing into the warm heaven of the older man’s mouth as Will let out a high-pitched, breathy moan. He fucked Hannibal’s mouth as his lover massaged, squeezed and spanked his ass, pushing his cock in further, wrecking Hannibal’s throat and pulling out with a wild cry whilst Hannibal smiled devilishly at him.

“Turn around,” Hannibal rasped, and Will obeyed in moments, leaning down to suck Hannibal’s cock again as the older man began eating Will’s ass out, lavishing him with deep, adoring lapping and sighing, that perfect, knowing tongue circling his hole and opening him so wonderfully.

Hannibal found the bottle of lube which Will had placed on the bed and slicked up his fingers before sinking one, then two thick digits deep inside him with gradual, careful, expert pressure, finding the sweet spot that made Will shake and mewl again as his hole squeezed Hannibal immediately, his body begging for more.

Will went on sucking and stroking Hannibal’s cock until he was so hard, he moaned ferally against Will’s hole, finally spanking him again and insisting, “Ride me, sweetheart, Daddy

needs you so badly."

"Oh, God," Will sighed, grabbing the lube and pouring a generous amount onto Hannibal's huge, pulsing cock.

He lowered himself slowly onto Hannibal until his eyes widened in the shock of how Hannibal stretched him, filled him and made him whole, the ecstasy of their joining far beyond every memory he'd tried and failed not to replay hundreds of times. It meant so much more for them to be together like this at last, honest, raw and on fire for each other, no whisper of a doubt or a deception to part them ever again.

Hannibal bit his own lower lip, harsh, overpowering pleasure gleaming in his pretty brown eyes. His damp hair slipped over his brow as with quivering hands he gripped harder onto Will's hips.

Will gazed at his lover's utter perfection, his strong body, that silvery hair dusting his firm chest and trailing down to the little softness in his low belly, his long legs splayed helplessly below Will.

"There's something I need you to know," Will said in his soft, boyish accent, the one he didn't let anyone else hear, fragile, intimate and right from his overflowing heart. He leaned forward as Hannibal rocked his hips up and down, starting a slow, deep, sweet rhythm of thrusting his thick cock inside Will's tight, velvety heat. "Yeah, that's so good, *God,* Hannibal, you know I love you, right?"

Hannibal nodded, his fingers sliding down the sweat on Will's back as tears glazed his eyes, his throat tight with emotion. "All this time, Will, I hoped…I could only hope."

"Baby," Will told him, his own voice nearly broken between fierce pleasure and soul-devouring feeling, "I remember what you said to me yesterday, when you were falling asleep. You said you didn't feel worthy, and I need you to know, *you're worthy,* you're so much more than that. You're my life, you're all I want."

Hannibal held onto Will tightly, weeping as he thrust slowly into him, the bliss of their joined bodies making them shiver harder and cling, moving with a knowledge of each others' need that was second nature. "I love you," Will repeated, his words taking away Hannibal's ability to form his own, and Will began moving faster, taking Hannibal in quickening strokes that sent lightening darting through his own body.

He kissed Hannibal's mouth tenderly, their tongues tangling with euphoric, savoring insistence, and Hannibal tried to sit up, grabbing Will with typical dominance, the need to take Will harder making him forget his injury, or simply forget to care about pain.

"Hey, be careful," Will laughed breathily, and he was crying, too, he realized, everything was happening so fast and all he wanted was more of Hannibal, to let himself be taken over completely, but not if it was going to hurt Hannibal. "You know you can't do that."

Stubborn as ever, Hannibal cupped Will's face and kissed him deeply, then moaned, "Hands and knees, sweetheart, I promise I'll be careful, but I'm going to give you what you need."

At least Hannibal was true to his word, Will reflected from somewhere under the daze of lust that made him obey, incapable of resisting what Hannibal offered, wanting him so much that he could hardly breathe.

Hannibal drew himself up and onto his knees, gingerly arranging himself so that his ankle was elevated behind him. Then he groped Will's ass possessively before pressing his immense-feeling cock back inside the younger man's tight body, hissing with immediate joy at the sensation.

"God, Hannibal, love you," Will moaned wetly, his face red as he held himself up on desperately shaky hands and knees, and Hannibal took him so hard, rough and fast, the way he liked it best. "I love you, want to be with you always."

Hannibal cried out, a stream of swears in Lithuanian which Will remembered with fond, deeply aroused delight, and he came into Will with animalistic pounding of his hips, the raunchy sound of their bodies slamming together, the sticky sweet scent of their union, all of it making Will even needier. Hannibal went on fucking him, pulling off an admirable balancing act out of irrepressible, almost furious need. He put such exquisite, targeted pressure on Will's prostate that Will came soon after, the orgasm so powerful he clutched at the sheets until they ripped, his long, keening moans making Hannibal grab his hip hard enough to leave deep bruises. By now, Hannibal had pushed himself far into oversensitivity, but still he only drew himself from Will's body out of regrettable necessity, a soft whining noise falling from his lips.

"It's okay," Will soothed, helping Hannibal lie down on his back again, curling up beside him and pulling the blankets over their shoulders. Here they were, in their own little world, wet and sticky with each other, tear-streaked and grinning so hard it hurt, staring into shining eyes with disbelief.

Hannibal threaded their fingers together and nuzzled his face into Will's, kissing his cheeks, his forehead, his nose, his mouth and jaw, cataloguing every inch of him as he so often did, for his memory palace.

"What I mean is, it's forever," Will assured him, nestling into Hannibal's chest, his face still burning hot against all that bristling chest hair, body heat and glorious scent, rich cologne and sex all tangled and thrilling his senses. "We're forever. I want you to know it with complete confidence. I don't ever want you to doubt that I love you this much, ever again."

Hannibal's heart thudded fast and hard under Will's ear as he threaded his fingers through Will's curls, playing with them as he always loved to. "Mylimasis. Aš tave myliu. I love you as I have loved no other, as no other can possess me. I am yours."

***

"I'm just saying that Fred is a good-looking guy," Will mused in a teasing voice a couple of hours later.

Miracle on 34th Street was playing on t.v., and they lounged lazily in their pajamas with a large appetizer platter from room service before them on the bed, matching flutes of

champagne on each of their side tables. Finally, Will was famished, devouring brie crostini and prosciutto-wrapped scallops with naughty glee, fully enjoying the delicious food *and* knowing how much Hannibal loved to spoil him.

“I suppose he is attractive enough,” Hannibal chuckled, feeding Will a plump, fresh orange slice. “For an insufferable idealist.”

“Come on, you’re not fooling me,” Will smirked. “This Christmas has you converted into idealism, too, even if it is our own monstrous variation. Admit it.”

“Hmm. Perhaps I *have* abandoned my cynicism in the wake of our reunion, dearest.”

“I knew it. And Fred might be handsome, but I’ve seen *much* better.” Will batted his long eyelashes up at Hannibal, who shook his head with another throaty laugh at his mischief.

“Oh, have you?” Hannibal inquired saucily as Will licked the juice from his fingers.

“Mmm, I have. What are you thinking about right now?”

“I think you should put that Christmas sweater back on and pause the movie,” Hannibal told him, raising his eyebrows and smoldering at him with a wicked smile.

***

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Hannibal, *fuck,*” Will almost yelled as he was pressed down firmly to the bed on his stomach and railed hard wearing only the Snowman sweater, his cock rigid against the sheets they had already almost destroyed. “Oh my God--”

“Your just desserts for all your wanton flirtation,” Hannibal gritted out, leaning on both of his palms planted to the bed as he fucked Will with all his might.

“Ohhhh, Daddy, Daddy,” Will moaned shamelessly, and Hannibal spanked him, pulled out and came all over his ass before gathering seed on his cock and thrusting back inside while Will went on wailing like a banshee, embarrassed of his loudness but completely incapable of stopping himself.

“God, baby, you’re going to break that ankle,” Will chided weakly.

Hannibal eased himself very cautiously into a sitting position and stretched his injured leg out, then pulled Will into his lap for more snuggles.

“Hardly. I certainly do not swim as many laps per week as I do, nor hunt so frequently without developing near-indefatigable calf strength and overall coordination.”

Will laughed and kissed his lips, stroking through his silky hair with total adoration. Even now, completely worn down by fucking the living daylights out of Will with the extra pressure of careful positioning and strain, Hannibal still spoke with haughty, know-it-all egotism that went right to Will’s cock, not that he could do anything about it now. His lover had once again made him come untouched beneath him, playing Will’s body like a favorite instrument, effortlessly strummed to ecstasy.

They watched the rest of the movie draped sloppily over each other, their breathing and heartbeats eventually slowing and evening out to steady. “Huh,” Will noted as the end credits rolled, “You know, the actor who played Kris Kringle, his name is Edmund.”

“Edmund?” Hannibal repeated, his brow furrowing as he sipped his champagne and massaged Will’s shoulder, unable to let a moment go by without stroking, caressing or otherwise possessing him. “Surely a coincidence.”

“Right,” Will nodded, unconvinced. “And Tommy Gibbons is a very generic name, he could have just...guessed that, or maybe that wasn’t even the kid’s name but it’s close enough that it seems to match my recollection.”

“With your photographic memory,” Hannibal considered, “It seems unlikely you would forget any detail in such a key incident from your childhood.”

“What are you saying?” Will laughed. “You don’t really think the Edmund we know is...you know…”

“Ho ho ho.” Hannibal smirked and Will bopped his nose.

“Hey, like I said, it takes one to know one.”

“Terrible boy,” Hannibal said with that husky laugh that always made shivers go through Will, even when he was laughing as hard himself. “You are most certainly on *my* naughty list. No, I merely meant, perhaps we should expand our minds to the possibility that certain Christmas mythology is rooted in fact. The evidence is certainly growing too convincing to dismiss.”

“You’re losing it,” Will chortled, kissing his chest. “There’s no such thing as Santa.”

“Obviously,” Hannibal conceded. “It must be my new idealism trying to convince me of more impossibilities.”

“Yes. He’s just a nice old man with whiskers, clearly.”

“Most likely.” Hannibal laughed when Will tickled his stomach in retaliation. “Stop that at once, you wicked thing. Now, then.”

He clasped Will’s face and gazed at him as greedily as ever. “Do you think Edmund would marry us? He seems like the sort of fellow who would be legally ordained for such a purpose. A romantic resort such as this probably sees its share of impromptu nuptials.”

“Hannibal Lecter,” Will replied, his cheeks turning pink again. “Are you saying--”

“I’m saying that I still have the rings,” Hannibal explained, blunt, tender and needy all at once. He roved his hand rhythmically through Will’s curls, looking at him as if he could never have his fill, enough kisses or touches or conversations, enough of hunting together, finding a new home of their own to fill with many years of love and memories. “I’m asking you to be mine, because I cannot bear anything less. I need all of you, and much more, every single day of our lives.”

“In that case, yes,” Will whispered, bursting into tears and not minding in the least. Together they were naked in every way, comfortable in exposing their deepest emotions. “Yes, a thousand times, marry me, Hannibal.”

Just then, the clock on the mantelpiece across from the bed chimed that the hour had turned to midnight. It was Christmas Eve.

***

Christmas

Edmund was, of course, an ordained minister, and he happily carried out the ceremony, not seeming surprised in the least.

They spent Christmas with joyous relaxation. Hannibal taught Will how to make beef wellington and gratin dauphinois, earning himself a flouring when he wouldn’t sit still and kept trying to get up to control how the recipe was going. They spent quiet hours reading together by the fireplace in the resort’s lounge, making occasional small talk with the other guests mainly to show off their constantly linked hands adorned with shining wedding bands. As soft Christmas music played, they kissed and watched the snow falling outside the window, then went back to their room for more lovemaking, followed by deep dreams of their future.

They honeymooned at the resort, and Hannibal’s ankle had healed completely by the day they checked out with plans to head to Molly’s place to pick up Will’s dogs. From there, they would go back to Hannibal’s in Baltimore, just for the time being, and mainly to see Abigail. When they had called to announce their marriage Abigail was so thrilled and eager for them to be a family at last, Will was delighted and relieved. It wasn't too late after all. Second chances were very real.

“I don’t think Molly will be surprised we’re remarried, *and* I very much doubt she’ll be alone, either,” Will reflected as they headed to the front desk to check out.

Hannibal had a fresh skip in his step as he not only acclimated to having his husband back by his side, but his usual elegance of deportment, which he had sorely missed while forced to use crutches. In a flawless blue suit finished off by a cravat which definitely would not look good on anyone else, but was incomparably handsome on Hannibal, he was the personification of marital bliss and endearing self-satisfaction.

“Really?” he inquired with passing interest.

“Yeah, I mean, didn’t you notice that there seemed to be something going on between Molly and Alana?” Will pointed out, slipping his hand easily into Hannibal’s, where it belonged, as they pulled their luggage behind them.

“I’m not the profiler, Will, but even with my considerable psychiatric expertise, I failed to notice any such thing.”

Will chuckled, noting that even now, Hannibal was so busy looking at his husband, when Will was only wearing his typical flannel and jeans (and one of Hannibal's coats), that he almost walked into the front desk despite his return to full mobility.

"I guess you were a little distracted," Will grinned, tugging Hannibal so that his husband narrowly avoided the collision. "Me, too, by the way."

He rang the bell and exchanged mischievous glances with Hannibal as they waited for an attendant to process their departure and final payments.

"Oh, I don't have a payment, actually, not that you would let me pay, of course," Will smirked. "I won this trip, it was very random. I got a call out of the blue one day that I had won this raffle at the church where me and Molly rarely even went. I didn't remember entering, and neither did she, but we weren't about to turn down a free trip."

Hannibal managed to keep himself composed despite his hatred of hearing about Will and Molly as a couple, even in passing. "What an odd occurrence. I myself only chose this resort because an anonymous person sent me an email telling me of the baking competition. Of course, I do enjoy collecting baking contest victories, and so…"

"And so how could you resist choosing this very resort for your winter getaway?" Will pondered, biting his lower lip. "Hmm. Doesn't this all sound a little too convenient?"

"Yes," Hannibal agreed. "Almost rather suspicious. Excuse me, Madison," he said to the young woman behind the front desk, "But do you think we could speak with Edmund before we depart? We'd love to thank him for all of his help during our stay."

"And we have a few questions," Will added.

Madison looked at them in complete bewilderment. "Who? I'm sorry, but I've worked here a few years, and I don't know an Edmund."

"But," Hannibal objected, "He's--"

"Hannibal," Will said, putting a hand on his arm, "Look."

In the corner of the room between the fireplace and the big Christmas tree which had been left up while the New Years' festivities commenced, there was a table with a tray of Edmund's signature sugar cookies. As if Edmund had disappeared into thin air and from everyone else's memories, but left a small token behind to confirm it had all really happened as they remembered.

"You don't think," Hannibal began in astonishment.

"You're the one who believed it first!" Will reminded him, fondly exasperated. "Hannibal, it has to be true. What, why do you look worried all of a sudden?"

"What if this means the marriage isn't legal?" Hannibal fretted.

Will shook his head, "Uh-uh, no way, we are *not* having yet another wedding ceremony."

“But,” Hannibal said, “What if--”

“Madison, if Santa Claus joins two people in holy matrimony, wouldn’t you call that legally binding?” Will inquired almost casually, turning back to the girl at the desk.

“Well,” she considered, “That’s a really weird question, but seeing as Santa is technically Saint Nicholas...I guess if a saint joins two people in marriage, it doesn’t get any more holy or binding than that, right? Oh, and Dr. Lecter, will you be paying by cash, card or check?”

As they headed out to Hannibal’s car, Will considered the matter in a muddle of confusion that quickly cleared to simple acceptance. “I guess if Christmas miracles are real, maybe magic is, too?”

“I can’t think of a better way to define the way I feel with you, Will.” Hannibal took Will’s suitcase and placed it in the trunk of his Bentley, then backed Will against the car with a loving smile. “It’s pure magic.”

They kissed, clinging to each other as if it was the first time, and Will asked softly, “Hey, Hannibal? I guess I just have one more question for you. Or it’s more of a request, I suppose.”

“You know my policy on your requests, mylimasis,” Hannibal answered with an indulgent look. “Anything and everything you ask of me is yours.”

“Good,” Will grinned, “Because my question is...you and me...and this place, Maple Oaks. All of it. Can we do this next Christmas?”

Chapter End Notes

Fic title totally taken from the Kenny and Dolly song, that's my favorite Christmas album!

Thanks for reading, and Happy Holidays! ❤️

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